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Johnny, Are You Queer?:
The Sexual and Gender Politics of Ambiguous Sexual Identity

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by

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Dedication

For Quentin Crisp, Andy Bell, Richard Simmons, and Howard Jones for being fabulous and for showing me new ways to move.

Johnny, Are You Queer?:
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Abstract: A number of scholars have pointed to the increasing visibility and acceptance of gays and lesbians in Western nations since the 1990s. One of the potential ramifications of these changes is a transformation in the construction of heterosexual identities. Some masculinities scholars have found evidence that heterosexual masculinity is changing to be more inclusive of practices that have been stereotyped as "gay" or "feminine." This dissertation adds nuance to these findings by studying straight-identified men who claim to be perceived as gay. Through life history interviews with 20 men, I examine the ways that ambiguous heterosexuals manage their sexual identity. I find that many of the men in my study self-identify as "feminine" men on account of their practices, comportment, and emotional traits. I highlight how the meanings of these "feminine" gender practices are inflected by men's class positions and racial identities. I also show how these men struggle to claim a straight identity in a culture where effeminacy is still conflated with being gay. Next, I explore the ways that straight people experience and make sense of being targets of homophobia. I found that most of my respondents experienced homophobia raging from the explicit and overt to more subtle forms of homophobic microaggressions on account of being gender non-

normative. However, I demonstrate how they draw on heterosexual privilege to mitigate negative social consequences that result from being read as gay. Finally, I show how ambiguous straight men's sexual identities are validated or undermined through their interactions with women.

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Chapter One: Introduction

In the summer of 2011, a controversy surrounding Minnesota Congresswoman Michele Bachmann's husband, Marcus Bachmann, hit the mainstream when ABC News aired an undercover video shot at his Christian counseling practice. There had been accusations for years from gay rights activists in Minnesota that therapists at Bachmann & Associates offered "reparative therapy," also known as gay conversion therapy. Although the Bachmanns had repeatedly denied these allegations, the undercover video shot by gay rights group Truth Wins Out revealed a counselor at Bachmann's clinic discussing services aimed at "curing" homosexuality. In response to this controversy, several commentators were quick to call Marcus Bachmann's masculinity into question in order to peg him as a closeted gay man.

On Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*, comedian/faux news anchor Jon Stewart introduced the story to the audience, followed by an audio clip of Michele Bachmann comparing the gay and lesbian "lifestyle" to bondage. After deriding Michele, Stewart said, "We haven't yet heard from Dr. Bachmann," which was followed by a video of Marcus unreservedly dancing with Michele on stage at a campaign rally. As the video showed Marcus enthusiastically spinning Michele around, Stewart looked incredulously at the audience and with apparent skepticism asked, "That's Michele Bachmann's husband?" In confusion, he exclaimed, "That's the guy teaching people not to be gay? Seriously? Is he teaching people not to be gay or is he like the Green Mile guy just

absorbing it all?" Stewart held his breath, cheeks puffed out, in a mock attempt to repress his compulsion to continue ridiculing Bachmann's effeminacy. Speaking to himself, he said, "No, no, you know what? I'm not going there…Just because Dr. Bachmann's therapy to 'cure gayness' does real damage to real people and he is seemingly curing them so he can hoard all the gayness for himself, that is no reason to let your primal urge to ridicule this seeming hypocrisy out…You know what, everyone looks gayer when they're dancing anyways. Let's just hear what he has to say." In an audio clip, the audience hears an interviewer ask, "What do you say when your teenager says she's gay?," to which Bachmann responds, "There's that curiosity but again…it is as if…we have to understand barbarians need to be educated. They need to be disciplined." After playing audio of Bachmann speaking, Stewart was ready to explode in reaction to hearing Bachmann's slightly lisping speech. To raucous cheering and laughter from the studio audience, he rocked back and forth holding his breath and bit his finger to contain himself. Unable to contain himself, Stewart exclaims: "Really?!? First of all, gay teenagers are barbarians who need to be educated?!? You m----- [holds back]." Beside him was an image of Marcus with an expressive smile that exceeded the bounds of normative masculinity.

Figure 1.1 Screen Shot from July 13, 2011 Episode of *The Daily Show*

Even sex advice columnist and gay rights activist Dan Savage seized on the lisp to provide proof of Bachmann's "true" sexual identity. On his radio show, Savage, relying on the "scientifically" proven effectiveness of "gaydar," claimed that just hearing Bachmann talk offered sufficient evidence of his gayness. Before playing the clip of Bachmann speaking, Savage asked his listeners to turn on their gaydar and tell him if "this guy is fag." Admittedly, Marcus Bachmann, with his problematic belief that same-sex desire can and should be "cured" through therapy, is an enticing target for suspicion and ridicule. Yet this ridicule has taken a troubling form, especially because those engaging in it are gay rights activists and their allies. For example, although Savage has repeatedly pointed out that painful homophobic taunts are aimed at kids who fail to conform to gender norms, regardless of whether they actually are gay, he disparaged Bachmann's effeminacy as he mocked and exaggerated Bachmann's lisp.

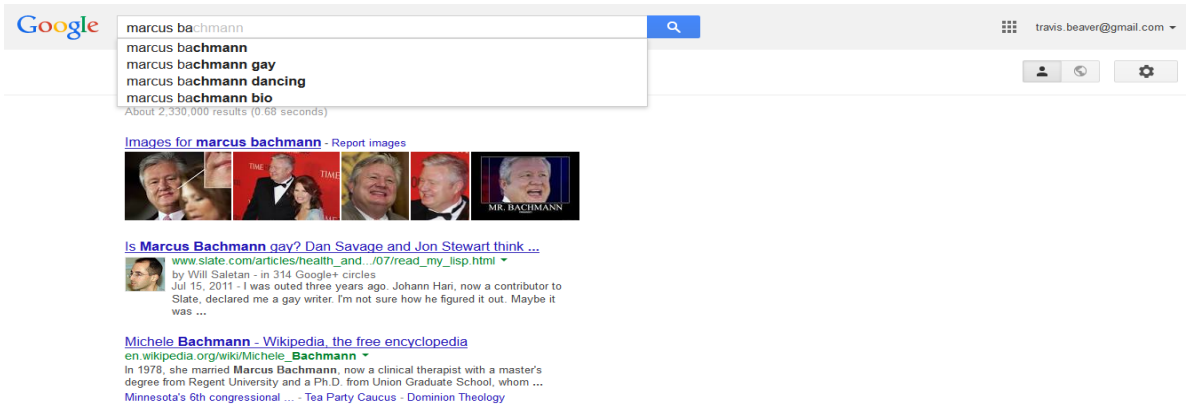


Figure 1.2 Search suggestion in Google for Marcus Bachmann

The insinuations made about Bachmann's sexuality by popular media figures like Stewart and Savage are not merely isolated examples of this discourse. In fact their jokes about Bachmann's closetedness were re-broadcast and endorsed on TV shows and popular websites like *Gawker*, *Huffington Post*, and *Jezebel*. For example, on the MSNBC show *The Last Word with Lawrence O'Donnell*, liberal pundit and host Lawrence O'Donnell played a clip of *The Daily Show* episode described above after providing the following introduction: "Jon Stewart tries *manfully* to resist the urge to do gay jokes about Michele Bachmann's husband, Marcus Bachmann. Jon realizes he's powerless in the face of this urge, and calls on a higher power for help – Mr Jerry Seinfeld." O'Donnell tellingly placed added emphasis on the word "manfully" to highlight the contrast between Stewart's masculinity and Bachmann's stigmatized effeminacy. On *Jezebel*, a website that averages 200,000 viewers per day, contributor Irin Carmon (2011) posted the clip from *The Daily Show* with the following title, "Jon Stewart Says What You've Been Thinking about Marcus Bachmann."

Perusing through the comment sections on websites that reposted the video clip from *The Daily Show* reveals that a majority of commenters concurred with Stewart's take on Marcus Bachmann. On *Huffington Post*, readers can click "fave" to mark comments that they like. The following reader comments represent the "most faved" in response to a post entitled, "Jon Stewart Mocks Marcus Bachmann, Gets Help From Jerry Seinfeld With 'Comedy Repression Therapy' (VIDEO):" "Look at it this way: The first woman president can still have a First Lady;" "Marcus should just give up the act and

move to Palm Springs and live a fabulous life;" "As I've said before, after watching Marcus Bachmann prance around in multiple videos and talk in various interviews, it is PAINFULLY PAINFULLY (sic) obvious that that man flames, 'I am gay! Hello!' brighter than a thousand suns simultaneously going super nova;" "Give Mr. Bachmann a break...he has just found the perfect way for a gay man in the closet to hang out with gay men...congrats Mr. Bachmann;" "My Gaydar not only went off when listening to this guy but it went into a two hour Judy Garland revue hosted by RuPaul and directed by John Waters;" "My gaydar hit defcon lavendar (sic) after hearing that voice" (McGlynn 2011).

I do not want to suggest that all of the viewers of these posts and videos about Marcus Bachmann believe that he is a closeted gay man. Yet I do claim that comments classifying Bachmann as a man whose homosexuality is obvious and indisputable represent a dominant narrative in response to the Bachmann controversy. Similar comments to the ones listed above can be found on multiple high-traffic websites that posted on the story. As these comments indicate, it is Marcus Bachmann's somatic effeminacy – the way he moves and uses his voice – that places him in the glass closet (see Hennen 2008 for a detailed description of "somatic effeminacy").

An examination of the responses to the reparative therapy controversy is instructive because it points to both shifts and continuities in public discourses about sexuality and gender. The very fact that the Bachmanns' belief in the effectiveness of gay conversion therapy generated controversy in the mainstream media arguably signals a change in public attitudes towards same-sex desire. That the Bachmanns came under

scrutiny for subscribing to the idea that being gay is a mental illness that can be "cured," and that they felt the need to publicly deny this belief, demonstrates a decreasing public acceptance of homophobia. Last month, President Barack Obama called for an end to "gay conversion" therapies for gay and transgender youth in a public statement that said his administration supports efforts to ban this practice at the state level (Shear 2015).

Yet the discourse about Marcus Bachmann's sexuality highlights the continuing dominance of the gender inversion model of homosexuality. This is the popular, but mistaken, belief that gay and lesbian people usually exhibit gender traits associated with the "opposite" sex, hence the stereotype of the effeminate gay man and the mannish lesbian. Setting aside for a moment the widely held belief that homophobia itself is a sign of repressed same-sex desire, Bachmann's failure to embody hetero-masculine norms functions as a sign of his latent homosexuality. By making this connection, Stewart, Savage, and online commenters share more in common with the ex-gay movement than they would likely care to acknowledge. Within the ex-gay movement, gender deviance is considered to be a sign of same-sex desire and part of "curing" homosexuality involves "straightening" up one's gender presentation in order to conform to gender norms (Gerber 2011). Of course, Stewart and Savage's critique of Bachmann is directed at his belief that homosexuality can and should be "cured." However, through this critique, Bachmann is rendered doubly deviant: first, because he fails to conform to hetero-masculine norms; and second, because he is assumed to be living in the closet as opposed to being openly gay. The insinuation that Bachmann is a "closet case" spotlights

the tenuous ontological status of the "feminine" straight man in our current sexual regime. Ironically, Marcus Bachmann himself is caught within a web of heteronormativity that he participates in spinning.

The jokes about Bachmann's effeminacy also highlight the limits of liberal tolerance. It is only because Bachmann is viewed as a closeted, and therefore self-loathing, gay man that his effeminacy can be openly mocked by liberal commentators like Stewart, Savage, and O'Donnell. Because he is not "out," Bachmann is an easy target for femmephobia, or the fear and hatred of femininity. In other words, liberal commentators would likely face a swift backlash if they mocked an out gay man for talking with a lisp or for dancing in an effeminate manner. This point was not lost on some of the readers contributing to online commentary about Bachmann and the jokes about his effeminacy. For example, one commenter on *Huffington Post* wrote:

> Was it just me that was bothered by the Daily Show's "Marcus Bachman is so gay" piece? It seemed to me to miss the mark horrendously, sidestepping the "might he be harming others because of his own inner conflicts" issues in favor of "LOOK AT HIM DANCING HE'S SO FRUITY!" cheap shots. Pointing a finger and yelling "FAG!" doesn't really help much, surely? (McGlynn 2011)

This sentiment was echoed in an opinion piece by Waymon Hudson (2011) on *ChicagoPride.Com* entitled, "The Marcus Bachmann Conundrum." Hudson writes,

> Making fun of Marcus Bachmann's "sissiness" or what some view as stereotypical gay behavior is the same thing that those that fight against our equality do. "Look- he dances really gay" or "that lisp makes him seem really gay" are both things that we would be outraged at as a community if it was used in a different context or directed at an ally or one of us in the media. Combatting the harassment over how someone acts is the main focus of many of our community's important campaigns and organizations.

These commenters, and others making similar arguments, do not attempt to weigh in on whether or not Bachmann is straight or gay, but focus their critique on the disparaging of effeminacy, and draw attention to the homophobia inherent in the stigmatization of effeminate men.

As the above comments indicate, some of the public discourse surrounding Bachmann includes critiques of jokes that stigmatize effeminate men, regardless of whether they are openly gay or closeted gay men. What is less common to find in the public discourse online or in the news media is the recognition that straight men can be feminine. However, there are exceptions. One commenter on a *Gawker* article entitled, "All Kinds of People Weighing in on Marcus 'Mr. Michele' Bachmann's Sexuality," wrote:

> Every man (or boy) who likes pink, bunny rabbits, dolls, and wearing dresses is not instantly gay. Every man (or boy) who likes black, Tonka trucks, guns, and wearing jeans is not instantly straight. We can decry Marcus Bachmann's hatred without setting our movement back fifty years to do it, people. What we're doing here right now is called burning the village in order to save it. (Apple 2011)

Another commenter on *Gawker* writes:

> Look, I get it...there is a certain stereotype of the Gay Man...all twinked out and singing show tunes. But that in no way represents all or even MOST gay men. Same with the gay lisp...it does occur but is by no means a prerequisite for being gay. My gay friends are kinda divided on the use of the term "straight-acting gay"…There is nothing wrong with being flaming gay if that is authentic to you, just as there is nothing wrong or odd about being gay and forsaking all of the traditional gay past-times for going to a sports event.
>
> And if that is the case then why can't their (sic) be (for want of a better term) gay-acting straight men? (Apple 2011)

These comments point to a recognition of the difference between gender presentation and sexual orientation. The struggle against the conflation of gender and sexuality, or the gender inversion model of homosexuality, has been an ongoing one for the gay and

lesbian community (Hennen 2008). These comments are evidence of everyday discourse that acknowledges that some gay men are masculine. They also highlight an acknowledgment that straight men can be feminine, which is a change that research on men has only recently begun to document (Anderson 2009; McCormack 2012; Dean 2014; Bridges 2014). The second comment also shows, though, that there is still confusion, and some difficulty, in coming to terms, both literally and figuratively, with "gay-acting straight men." As speculation about Marcus Bachmann's sexuality illustrates, this is largely because gender non-conformity continues to be strongly tied to a gay sexual identity in public discourses in the United States. These issues remain of central importance in US society, and I explore these themes in more detail in this dissertation.

"Johnny, Are you Queer?"

The title of this dissertation is taken from a Josie Cotton song. In her 1982 hit single, "Johnny, Are You Queer?," Josie Cotton passionately sings over catchy new wave pop music: "Johnny, what's the deal boy / Is your love for real boy / When the lights are low / You never hold me close // And I saw you today boy / Walking with them gay boys / God it hurt me so / Now I gotta know / Johnny, are you queer? // 'Cause when I see you / Dancing with your friends / I can't help wondering / Where I stand."

Figure 1.3 Screen Shot from "Johnny, Are You Queer?"

In the official music video, Josie, wearing a red and white polka-dotted romper, sings the song while sitting on a park bench next to "Johnny," a prototypical 1980's nerd who sports broken glasses repaired with white tape, a cardigan sweater over a polka-dotted button-down, a bowtie, and ill-fitting pants. Johnny, sitting rigidly, stares straight ahead to avoid Josie's coy glances as he nervously taps his knees with his hands in an offbeat rhythm to the music. As the video progresses, Josie becomes more aggressive with her advances. She moves closer to Johnny each time he inches away while she pleads: "I'm so afraid I'll lose you / If I can't seduce you / Is there something wrong? / Johnny come on strong // Why are you so weird, boy? / Johnny are you queer boy? / When I make a play / You're pushing me away / Johnny, are you queer?" As the screenshot above illustrates, Josie gropes Johnny as he awkwardly attempts to wriggle out of her grasp. Now at the end of the bench, Johnny scrambles out of her clutches by rolling over the armrest and falling onto the ground while Josie sings, "Oh, why are you

so weird, boy? / Johnny are you queer boy? / When you asked for a date / I thought that you were straight / But, Johnny, are you queer?" (Cotton 1982). Given Johnny's failure to demonstrate his straightness in the bedroom, along with his "questionable" engagement in dancing and his fraternizing with "gay boys," the listener is left to conclude that the song's title is a rhetorical question.

This dissertation is about the experiences of straight-identified men who are perceived as, and sometimes suspected of, being gay. Through life history interviews, I examine how these men make sense of being "mistaken as gay" in social interactions. I explore when and where these incidents occur, what the misreading of their sexuality identity looks like, and how these men "know" they are being read as gay. Additionally, I discuss their interpretations of why their sexual identity is misrecognized, and how they feel about being read as gay. In my analysis of their stories, I pay close attention to questions of power and privilege and the ways their experiences are shaped by their class position and racial identity. I argue that these straight-identified men's experiences and interpretations of being read as gay offer a heuristic for understanding transformations and continuities in the relationship between gender and sexuality in contemporary American culture. These stories offer insights into some of the ways in which heterosexual masculinities are shifting in the context of increasing visibility of gays and lesbians.

Transformations in the Social and Legal Status of Gays and Lesbians

Sexualities scholars have documented dramatic shifts in the social and legal status of gays and lesbians in the U.S. over the last two decades. Evidence can be found in public opinion polls, in increasing LGBTQ visibility, and in the dismantling of legal discrimination. There are signs of an increasing, if uneven, acceptance of gays and lesbians and a decreasing tolerance for homophobia in the U.S. and other Western nations (Seidman 2003; Anderson 2009; Jackson and Scott 2010). For example, a Gallop opinion poll from 2011 found that for the first time a majority of Americans (53%) believe that same-sex marriage should be recognized as legally valid and accorded the same rights as "traditional" marriages (Newport 2011). A poll from March 2013 conducted by ABC News/Washington Post found that 58% of Americans think that gays and lesbians should be allowed to legally wed, a significant increase from a 2004 poll that found only 32% in favor of gay marriage (Langer 2013).[1] Even the Boy Scouts of America, an organization that won a Supreme Court case in 2000 allowing them to continue banning gays from membership, made headlines when it was announced that leaders were considering lifting the controversial ban on gay members (Williams 2013).

Indications of growing public acceptance of gays and lesbians has coincided with heightened gay visibility in the media, including an increasing number of media representations that portray gays and lesbians as "normal" as opposed to sick and immoral (Walters 2001; Seidman 2003). For example, ABC's top-rated sitcom *Modern*

Family includes a gay couple raising an adopted daughter in its cast of regular characters. Not to be outdone, NBC premiered a sitcom in 2012 called *The New Normal* that centers on a gay couple's relationship with a down-on-her-luck single mother who decides to become their gestational surrogate. The titles of these sitcoms themselves point to transformations in how American families are imagined and portrayed. In the realm of daytime TV, Ellen DeGeneres, who caused a stir when she came out as a lesbian on her sitcom *Ellen* in 1997, currently hosts a popular daytime talk show called *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* that is in its tenth season. These examples represent just a few of the numerous shows that prominently feature gay and lesbian characters or hosts that openly identify as lesbian or gay.

Alongside these changes in public opinion and media representations, Steven Seidman's (2003) research suggests that many gays and lesbians are now living "beyond the closet," meaning that they are living openly gay lives as opposed to concealing their sexual identity. As a result, increasing numbers of heterosexual Americans engage with openly gay and lesbian people in their workplaces, families, and schools. Of course, it is necessary to exercise caution when discussing progressive changes in the lives of lesbian and gay-identified people. Even as an increasing number of states have legalized gay marriage and outlawed discrimination based on sexual orientation, full citizenship rights have not been extended to gays and lesbians at the federal level. Heterosexual dominance remains institutionalized and many LGBTQ[2] people still contend with homophobia in their everyday lives (Moore 2014). In spite of continuing oppression,

shifts in the social status of gays and lesbians can be recognized, but should be qualified by noting the complex political ramifications and unevenness of these changes.

My research is situated within the context of the shifts outlined above. In a culture where sexuality is defined by the heterosexual/homosexual binary, changes in meanings of one of these identity categories results in changes to the other (Sedgwick 2008; Richardson 1996). For example, with the rise of the gay liberation movement in the 1970s, heterosexuality lost its unquestioned status (Katz 1995). As a result of increasing visibility of gays and lesbians, straight people have become increasingly self-conscious about heterosexuality as an orientation (Seidman 2003; Dean 2014). The question posed by Josie Cotton, "Johnny, are you queer?" only makes sense in a culture where straightness can no longer be assumed, but must be demonstrated.

As the example of Marcus Bachmann illustrates, being in a relationship with someone of the other sex does not always offer sufficient evidence of one's heterosexuality. Due to the continuing conflation of gender and sexuality, performing and signaling a straight identity largely depends upon adherence to gender norms (Connell 1995; Kimmel 2001; Pascoe 2007). However, some masculinity scholars argue this is changing in light of increasing gay visibility and decreasing social acceptability of homophobia. While they disagree on the meanings of these transformations, these scholars contend that heterosexual masculinity is opening up to incorporate practices previously considered "gay" or "feminine" (Demetriou 2010; Coad 2008; Anderson 2009; McCormack 2012; Dean 2014; Bridge 2014; Bridges and Pascoe 2014). The

degree to which these shifts are occurring and the impact they have on the lived experiences of straight-identified men continues to be debated. This project is situated within this small, but growing, body of research that examines changes in the construction and performance hetero-masculinities. My research about the experiences of straight-identified men who are perceived as gay contributes to this scholarship by highlighting the persistence of gender policing even in the context, and sometimes purportedly in the service, of increased LGBTQ visibility.

Organization of the Manuscript

In the following chapter, Chapter Two, "Literature Review and Sociological Relevance," I provide a critical review of the literature that informs this study. This chapter begins with an overview of social constructionist approaches to studying sexuality. After summarizing the key assumptions of this paradigm, I show how this framework influenced theoretical and empirical work on gay and lesbian identities. Next, I discuss literature within critical heterosexuality studies to highlight how this subfield challenges the assumed naturalness of heterosexuality. Then I examine the literature on masculinities in order to spotlight key debates and to explain the theoretical work about gender that informs this study. Finally, I point to the ways that this project has wider sociological relevance beyond the subfields of gender and sexuality.

In Chapter Three, "Research Methods," I outline the methods employed in this study. I begin with a discussion of the research questions that guided the project and explain why I chose to interview straight-identified men who claim to be perceived as gay. Next, I describe the research design of the study. In this section I give details about data collection and analysis, recruitment methods, sample demographics, and location of the study. I then turn to an exploration of the limitations of the study, followed by a statement about ethical issues, and a discussion about my positionality.

In Chapters Four through Six, I present the major findings from my research. In Chapter Four, "'I'm effeminate. I recognize that. I embrace that:' Feminine Straight Men and the Conflation of Gender and Sexuality," I draw upon life history interviews to show how the glass closet phenomenon plays out in the lives of straight-identified men I interviewed. I begin by explaining what it means when the men in my study describe themselves as feminine or effeminate. Next, I show how the meanings of male femininity are inflected through classed and racialized experiences. I conclude with an exploration of how "feminine" straight men negotiate the conflation of gender and sexuality in American culture.

In Chapter Five, "Talk like a Man. Walk like a Man, My Son: Straight-identified Individuals' Experiences of Homophobia," I examine the ways that my participants experience and make sense of being targets of homophobia. I found that most respondents I interviewed had experienced homophobia raging from the explicit and overt to more subtle forms of homophobic microaggressions on account of being gender

non-normative. For my interviewees, their parents, in particular, expressed anxieties that they were, or would become, gay. In my analysis of these experiences, I explain why some straight individuals did not utilize the concept of homophobia to categorize negative social interactions that stemmed from being perceived as gay. I also show how even gender non-normative straight people draw on heterosexual privilege to mitigate negative social consequences that result from being read as gay. These findings illustrate how homophobia impacts people who self-identify as straight and provide a nuanced understanding of how heterosexual privilege operates in social interactions.

In Chapter Six, "The Gay Best Friend and the Wolf in Sheep's Clothing: Ambiguously Straight Men's Interactions with Women," I examine the ways men in my study talked about their interactions with women. In this chapter, I analyze men's stories about women's misrecognition of their straight identity. I focus on two tropes – the "gay best friend" and the "wolf in sheep's clothing" – that describe ambiguous straight men's interactions with women. First, I discuss men's experiences with and interpretations of being placed in the role of the "gay best friend." Next, I illustrate how men offer pragmatic and ethical justifications for "coming out" as straight to women. Finally, I show that while most men claimed to not lead women on, at least some men do fit the "wolf-in-sheep's clothing" trope, which involves consciously taking advantage of perceptions that they are gay men in order to gain intimate access to women.

In Chapter 7, "Conclusion," I review some of the major themes that emerged from my interviews. I also contextualize these men's narratives by showing how they connect

to dominant discourses about sexuality in the contemporary United States. In my discussion of the limitations of this study, I offer suggestions for future research. Despite these limitations, I argue that the experiences of the men in my study offer a heuristic for understanding shifts and continuities in the construction of men's straight identities in the context of increasing gay visibility.

Notes for Chapter One

[1] Among younger Americans, the percentage in favor of allowing gay marriage is even higher. The Gallop poll found that 62% of those age 18-29 support legalizing gay marriage, as compared to only 31% of those age 65 and older (Newport 2011). The ABC New/Washington Post found that 81% of adults under age 30 were in favor of gay marriage being legal (Langer 2013).

[2]LGBTQ is an acronym that is commonly used to refer to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (or "questioning") community.

Chapter Two: Literature Review and Sociological Relevance

In this chapter I provide a critical review of the literature that informs this study. This chapter begins with an overview of social constructionist approaches to studying sexuality. After summarizing the key assumptions of this paradigm, I show how this framework influenced theoretical and empirical work on gay and lesbian identities. Next, I discuss literature within critical heterosexuality studies to highlight how this subfield challenges the assumed naturalness of heterosexuality. Then I examine the literature on masculinities in order to spotlight key debates and to explain the theoretical work about gender that informs this study. Finally, I point to the ways that this project has wider sociological relevance beyond the subfields of gender and sexuality.

The Social Construction of Sexuality

In the latter half of the 19th century, scientists set out to develop a science of sexuality. This science of sex, known as "sexology," was based on the assumption that the truth, or essence, of sexuality is rooted in biology. Early sexologists viewed sexuality as a pre-social, instinctual drive stemming from biological mandates (Weeks 1985; Stein 1989). Within this framework, "sex" was conceptualized as distinct from, and in opposition to, the "social."[1] The sex/society dualism underlying the theories of 19th century sexologists continues to inform both scientific and everyday discourses on

sexuality (Weeks 1985; Seidman 1997). For example, the fields of sociobiology and evolutionary psychology maintain that sexual practices are reducible to the biological. These biological determinist paradigms dominate popular science reporting on sexuality in the mainstream media (Lancaster 2003).

The prevalence of sexual essentialism in popular media both shapes and reflects everyday understandings of sexuality. The belief that sexuality is an instinctual drive rooted in biology remains hegemonic in our contemporary culture. Arlene Stein (1989:2) speculates that the continuing appeal of the drive model is due to the fact that "most people experience their sexuality as a powerful, natural, unchanging force." In other words, a resonance with subjective experience strengthens the apparent explanatory force of models rooted in sexual essentialism.[2] For many in the gay rights movement, asserting the innateness of same-sex desire both resonates with subjective experience and serves as a political tactic for gaining full civil rights. Alongside gay rights activists' claims that they were "born this way," scientists interested in the etiology of homosexuality continue to search for evidence of genetic origins. Publicized findings pointing to the biological basis of same-sex desire are utilized by gay rights activists to bolster claims that their sexuality was not a choice (Lancaster 2003). Through this interplay between everyday and scientific discourses, the essentialist belief that sexuality is rooted in nature has become "common sense."

In keeping with what Peter Berger (1963) has called sociology's "debunking" motif, sociologists interested in the social construction of reality have challenged this

common sense understanding of sexuality since the 1960s (Stein 1989). Although social constructionism encompasses a range of approaches to understanding sexuality, those working within this paradigm contest the antithesis set up by sexologists between "sex" and "society" (Seidman 1997). On the contrary, constructionists view sex as fundamentally social, meaning there is no pure, unchanging essence to sexuality that exists outside of, or unmediated by, culture. Jeffrey Weeks (1985:4) nicely summarizes this perspective (1985:4): "The erotic possibilities of the human animal…can never be expressed 'spontaneously' without intricate transformations; they are organized through a dense web of beliefs, concepts and social activities in a complex and changing history." In other words, there is no universal truth about sexuality for scientists to discover.[3] If sexuality is always already mediated by culture, it will be constructed and experienced in different ways depending on the historically specific social milieu. Therefore, the meaning of the concept "sexuality" itself cannot be assumed a priori: what is defined or understood as "sexuality" will vary across time and space. As Michel Foucault (1990) argues, the very notion of "sexuality" is a social construct of relatively recent historical origin.

Constructionist perspectives shift the focus of sexuality studies away from instinctual drives and towards the social organization of sexuality, or what Steven Seidman calls "sexual regimes." Seidman (1997:86) defines a "sexual regime" as "a field of sexual meanings, discourses, and practices that are interlaced with social institutions and movements." For constructionists, sexual regimes do not mold pre-social sexual

drives in a negative way by repressing and channeling them. Instead, they *produce* sexuality. This radical insight is often attributed to Michel Foucault, yet sociologists working from the symbolic interactionist tradition utilized this theoretical approach to understanding sexuality a decade prior to Foucault's canonical work *The History of Sexuality* (Epstein 1994; Jackson and Scott 2010). For example, labeling theorists studied the effects of categorizing individuals as "homosexual." According to this framework, this socially created category was externally imposed on individuals, but was then internalized through a process of socialization. Being labeled "homosexual" produced a stigmatized identity that constrained individual choices and worked to enforce the boundary between "normal" and "deviant" sexuality (Stein 1989; Epstein 1994). Other symbolic interactionists, like John Gagnon and William Simon (1973), focused on sexuality as a mundane social practice. For Gagnon and Simon, sexual practices do not stem from instinctual drives but are instead guided by "sexual scripts" that emerge through a process of learning and are reproduced and transformed through social interaction. Of central importance to Gagnon and Simon are the subjective meanings attributed to sexual practices. These meanings are not fixed but are interpreted and negotiated through interactive processes. The focus on sexual categories created through labeling and socially produced "sexual scripts" worked to denaturalize sexuality. However, these early sociological theories failed to fully consider the extent to which sexual meanings and practices are institutionalized and they often failed to foreground the issue of power (Seidman 1997; Stein 1989).

Seidman's definition of sexual regimes is useful because it encourages a systematic approach to studying the social production of sexuality. For example, mediating categories – "good," "bad," "normal," "abnormal," – that organize the way we think about and experience sexual practices are influenced by both expert and everyday folk discourses. These discourses are promulgated by a range of social institutions: religious, familial, medical, scientific, economic, legal, political, and cultural (Weeks 1985). Yet sexual practices and the meanings attributed to them also emerge from and are negotiated within face-to-face interactions (Gagnon and Simon 1973). Furthermore, discourses that create sexual hierarchies by categorizing some practices as "legitimate" and others as "illegitimate" are challenged through counter-discourses produced by social movements (D'Emilio 1998). As Seidman (1997: 81) points out, "Framing 'sex' as social unavoidably makes it a political fact." The shift from searching for the essence of sexuality in "nature" to the analysis of historically specific sexual regimes brings the politics of sex into sharp focus.[4] Turning to the question of sexual identities, a primary battleground in contemporary sexual politics, further illustrates the importance of analyzing sexual regimes. In particular, focusing on identities highlights the centrality of the heterosexual/homosexual binary, which operates as a master category in the social construction of sexuality (Seidman 1997).

The Invention, Production, and Politics of Gay and Lesbian Identities

Although social constructionist approaches to studying sexuality predate the first volume of Michel Foucault's (1990) *The History of Sexuality*, this highly influential work both consolidated and extended the constructionist paradigm (Katz 1995; Epstein 1994; Stein 1989; Angelides 2001). In this work, Foucault develops a critique of what he calls the "repressive hypothesis." For Foucault, this hypothesis is predicated on the mistaken belief that instinctual sexual drives have been repressed by social forces; and, therefore, it maintains the false dualism between "sex" and "society." Furthermore, this "myth" conceives of power as only repressive. In other words, this is power defined in the negative, the power to say, "No." In contrast, Foucault argues that power, while it can work through repression, is primarily a productive force. This form of power is not something that one possesses or lacks, and it is not centrally located; instead, power is diffuse, it flows through discourses and diverse sets of social practices and apparatuses. In Foucault's theoretical framework, there is no subject outside of power who resists repression. Subjects themselves are constituted through the "microphysics" of power, or techniques that facilitate its diffusion. The production of knowledge, or "regimes of truth," is central to the diffusion of power in the modern era. Power and knowledge are inseparably linked in this framework; hence Foucault uses the term "power/knowledge" to signify this linkage.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault focuses on the power/knowledge that flowed through expert discourses to produce new forms of sexual subjectivity. In contrast to the misconception that talk about sex was censored in the Victorian era, Foucault argues that there was in fact a flourishing of discourses about sexuality in the late 19th century. Medical and scientific discourses were of particular importance because they reorganized sexuality through the production of new sexual categories. For example, these institutions invented "the homosexual" as a sexual category. Their discourses brought into being that which they only claimed to name by triggering a shift in focus from sexual behaviors to one of identities, or sexual personhood. In an oft-cited passage, Foucault (1990:43) writes, "The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology…The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species." Here Foucault acknowledges that sexual acts between members of the same gender are nothing new. What has changed is how those acts are classified and, in turn, experienced. In the past, the distinction was made between "natural" and "unnatural" acts: acts of sodomy were subject to juridical punishment because they were "unnatural," but they did not define the truth of one's being. It was through the productive power of expert discourses that same-sex desire came be understood as revealing this truth. These discourses inflated the importance of sexuality by defining it as a central site of subjectivity, something that reveals one's inner essence. As a result, they ushered in new modes of

social control by creating normal and abnormal identities (Epstein 1994). This social control was not only externally imposed, but operated through the construction of sexual subjectivity as people began to understand and define themselves through these identity categories.

Foucault's work on sexuality has been criticized for its historical inaccuracies, its focus on elite discourse as opposed to everyday discourse, its reliance on studying texts as opposed to actual sexual behavior, its lack of attention to gender, its "oversocialized" conception of the individual, and, related to the previous point, for denying the possibility of agency and resistance (Chauncey 1994; Epstein 1994; Giddens 1993; Stein 1989; Katz 1995). Despite these criticisms, Foucault's insights regarding the social construction of sexuality have influenced a range of scholarship in the fields of gay and lesbian studies and queer theory. Of particular importance is the idea that sexual identity categories are a relatively recent way of conceptualizing sexuality. These organizing categories arise in particular sociohistorical moments and cannot be applied universally or projected retrospectively onto early historical periods. In other words, sexual identities must be historicized and their interconnection with power must be brought to the foreground.

These theoretical arguments provided productive starting points for scholars interested in denaturalizing the "homosexual" identity category.[5] Instead of assuming a timeless essence to homosexuality, researchers have investigated the sociohistorical origins and traced the changing meanings of gay and lesbian identities. This subsequent work on historicizing homosexuality moved beyond Foucault's exclusive reliance on

expert discourse. George Chauncey's (1994) research on working class gay subcultures in early 20th century New York City, for example, focuses on grassroots understandings of same-sex desire and practices. Through this "history from below," Chauncey shows that our contemporary hetero/homo binary was not the dominant classificatory scheme used among working class men in NYC prior to the 1930s. Engaging in homosexual practices did not necessarily result in men being labeled as "abnormal" or as "homosexual." A man who had sex with other men but still conformed to gender norms was not considered to be a "homosexual."[6] Furthermore, Chauncey finds that early 20th century gay subcultures provided a space for men to challenge the notion that their same-sex desire made them sick or abnormal, which indicates that pathologizing medical discourses were not simply internalized.

Other researchers, like historian John D'Emilio (1992; 1998), examined the role that macro-structural changes and major historical events played in the production of gay and lesbian identities. In his classic essay, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," D'Emilio (1992) argues that capitalism's undermining of the nuclear family's material base was a necessary factor contributing to the rise of modern gay identities. World War II was another contributing factor: it led to a large concentration of young people in major port cities, away from the strict social control of the small town and rural communities where they grew up (D'Emilio 1998). These structural and demographic changes, in combination with state persecution and pathologizing medical discourses, also led to the formation of homophile organizations. These social movement organizations played a

central role in changing the meaning of same-sex desire by asserting that homosexuals are an oppressed minority that deserves equal rights (D'Emilio 1998).

Scholars working in the symbolic interactionist tradition have shown how sexual identity categories are produced, reproduced, and transformed through micro-interactions. For example, both Kristin Esterberg's (1997) and Arlene Stein's (1997) research on lesbian identities illustrates how some women came to self-identify as lesbian through their involvement with the feminist movement. For these women, this identification was viewed as a political act that symbolized their rejection of patriarchal society. Both Esterberg and Stein argue that lesbian identity, whether conceived of as political or not, is brought into being through performance. Stein (1997:89) writes, "Identity is not a 'truth' that is discovered: it is a performance enacted. Identities often do not spring forth effortlessly from individuals: rather, individuals effect change in the meanings of particular identities. One is not born a lesbian; one becomes a lesbian through acts of reflexive self-fashioning." As both researchers show, the self-fashioning involved in becoming a lesbian does not occur in a vacuum – performances are always guided and constrained by locally specific norms.

Research on gay and lesbian identities highlights the political nature of these sexual categories. Self-identifying or being labeled as gay or lesbian has real consequences when heterosexuality is deeply rooted in social institutions and is the dominant cultural norm. Since the post-WWII era, heterosexual dominance has been aggressively enforced by an array of social institutions, including the state (Seidman

2003). For this reason, the metaphor of the closet has been central to understanding the experiences of gays and lesbians in the latter half of twentieth-century America. Steven Seidman (2003:25) defines "the closet" as "a life-shaping pattern of homosexual concealment." Under conditions of social oppression, gays and lesbians have been pressured to manage their sexual identity by concealing their same-sex desires. For some, this has meant leading a double life: marrying and having children in order to "pass" as heterosexual while engaging in secret sexual affairs on the side.[7] For others, it has meant repressing same-sex desires entirely. This, of course, assumes that having same-sex desires reveals a "true" homosexual self (Seidman et. al 1999).

Inseparably linked to the concept of "the closet," is the notion of "coming out:" the act of privately and publicly embracing one's "true" gay identity. In the post-Stonewall era, coming out of the closet has been viewed as a necessary act both for individual psychological well-being and for collectively achieving gay rights (Gross 1993; Seidman et al. 1999).[8] Individuals who remain "closeted," those with same-sex desires or people who engage in sexual practices with others of the same-sex without claiming a gay identity, are often viewed as self-loathing gays who suffer from internalized homophobia (Gross 1993; Love 2007; Ward 2008). Public figures – politicians, athletes, actors, and musicians – believed to be closeted have faced particularly intense pressure from gay and lesbian activists to come out publicly as gay. For example, beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s, gay rights activists began to view the practice of "outing" closeted public figures as a necessary step to fight the

invisibility of gay and lesbian people, which was believed to contribute to their marginalization and oppression (Gross 1993).

While the logic of "the closet" implies that individuals have a "true" and static sexual identity, the metaphor of "coming out" implies that once an individual privately and publicly proclaims to be gay they will be read and understood as such from that moment on. Yet coming out is not something that happens once, but is a performative act, in the sense of bringing an identity into being, that occurs whenever gay and lesbian people decide to reveal their sexual identity to new people (Seidman 2003; Sedgwick 2008). This is because in a heteronormative society people are assumed to be heterosexual unless there are signs, like gender nonconformity, that indicate otherwise. This means that even "out" masculine gay men and "out" feminine lesbians are typically assumed to be straight (Weston 1996; Seidman 2003; Hennen 2008). On the flipside, feminine men and masculine women are often assumed to be gay regardless of how they identify (Heasley 2005). Gender non-conforming individuals who claim to be straight, or who do not openly and publicly proclaim to be gay, are often characterized as being in the "glass closet," which means that their true sexuality is considered to be readily apparent. Television news anchor Anderson Cooper's coming out provides an illustration of this phenomenon. Cooper's coming out was largely seen as simply stating the obvious as his appearance and mannerisms already marked him as a gay man. In other words, being in the "glass closet" means that one's sexual identity is an open secret (Sedgwick 2008). Although scholars have studied how the politics and imperatives of visibility

impact members of LGBTQ communities differently based on race, gender identity, and geography (Ross, 2005; McCune 2014; Valentine 2007; Gray 2009;), little research has focused on how these politics impact people who self-identify as heterosexual.

While "the closet" has been foundational to understanding gay and lesbian identity formation, Seidman et al. (1999) argue that there is evidence of its declining social significance in the U.S. They suggest that many gays and lesbians are now living "beyond the closet" (see also Seidman 2003; Dean 2014). This does not mean that individuals no longer engage in sexual identity management, but that this management is more situation-specific as opposed to shaping entire life patterns. Instead of being concealed entirely, gay and lesbian identities have been increasingly "normalized" and "routinized" on an interpersonal level to a degree that was not possible in the era dominated by the closet. Here "normalized" refers to subjective acceptance of these identities, while "routinized" refers to the integration of homosexuality into one's social life. Seidman is careful to argue that despite these changes, the routinization of gay and lesbian identities has largely not occurred at the institutional level. However, these transformations at the interpersonal level signal a shift in our contemporary sexual regime. One possible result of these changes is the decentering of homosexuality as the basis for individual and collective identity (Seidman 2003). The language of "the closet" and "coming out" assumes that same-sex desire forms the core of one's identity. The decline of the closet has led to a deemphasizing of sexuality as a central marker of a "core" self. Other recent scholarship on gay and lesbian identities also points to evidence

that this shift towards a "post-gay" identity is occurring (Sinfield 1998; Brekhus 2003; Lewin 2009).

The research cited in this section is important because it illustrates the necessity of historicizing identity categories. There is no timeless, universal essence to homosexuality: gay and lesbian identities are social and historical products. While same-sex desires and sexual practices can surely be found in all societies, the meanings of these desires and practices vary across cultures and can change over time. This research convincingly shows that the connection between sexual practices and identities cannot be assumed. Identities are produced through particular discourses and under particular structural and cultural conditions. The primacy of "sexual identity" as an organizing category of sexuality will only exist in some sexual regimes. Even in these regimes, sexual identities are not inherent in individuals but are formed through a dialectical process "between identification by others and self-identification, between objectively assigned and subjectively appropriated identity" (Stein 1989:7).

Queerying Heterosexuality

While research into the formation of gay and lesbian identities was intended to denaturalize these identity categories, this work has been criticized for reifying the heterosexual/homosexual binary (Stein and Plummer 1994; Jagose 1996; Seidman 1997; Valocchi 2005). An examination of gay and lesbian experiences was understandable and

important because it highlighted hidden histories. However, an exclusive focus on gay and lesbian identities unintentionally worked to "naturalize" heterosexuality. As sexuality studies became increasingly reduced to the study of homosexuality, heterosexuality was left largely unexamined (Epstein 1994; Katz 1995; Jackson and Scott 2010). The formation of homosexual identities was seen as requiring explanation, while heterosexuality was left unproblematized, which implied that it was timeless and unchanging. As critical scholars have observed, one way that dominant categories retain their normative status is by remaining unmarked. Jonathan Katz (1995:16) writes, "Unless pressed by powerful, insistent voices, we fail to name the 'norm,' the 'normal,' and the social process of 'normalization,' much less consider them perplexing, fit subjects of probing questions." Failing to subject heterosexuality to critical scrutiny reproduces the "normality" of this sexual identity category.

To rectify this problem, queer theorists, and others working within what could be called "critical heterosexuality studies," have turned their attention to the hetero/homo binary, which they argue acts as a central organizing structure in our contemporary society. These scholars have developed the concept of "heteronormativity" to call attention to heterosexuality's status as the socially legitimated standard for sexual relationships (Ingraham 2005). This means that heterosexuality is viewed as natural and normal, while homosexuality is constructed as an unnatural and inferior form of sexuality. Heteronormativity refers to the sets of norms and discourses that work to produce heterosexuality as the taken-for-granted form of sexual identity (Valocchi 2005).

It also points to the ways that heterosexuality is deeply embedded in social institutions (Ingraham 2005; Jackson and Scott 2010).[9]

Within a heteronormative sexual regime, the naturalization of heterosexuality means that it is rarely questioned. Because it is the taken-for-granted sexual identity, people are typically assumed to be heterosexual unless there are outward signs, like gender nonconformity, that raise doubts about this status. This means that while gays and lesbians are often called on to account for their sexual identity, heterosexuals are largely exempt from questions about theirs (Jackson and Scott 2010).[10] Furthermore, as a naturalized, taken-for-granted form of sexuality, heterosexuality is commonly represented as a universal and monolithic category. Yet this framing elides variation in the meanings and sexual practices that exist within the category "heterosexuality" (Richardson 1996). As Seidman (2003) and others have argued, there is a hierarchy of respectability among heterosexuals: those who are in committed, monogamous relationships are at the top of the hierarchy, while those who engage in polyamory or S&M, for example, are located at the bottom. Moreover, heterosexuality, like homosexuality, takes on different meanings as it intersects with other identity categories like race and class. Non-whites, along with the white working class, are frequently represented as deviant heterosexuals who fail to live up to white, middle-class norms of sexual propriety (Collins 2005; Bettie 2003; Lawler 2008).

One way to challenge assumptions that heterosexuality is a monolithic, universal, and unchanging category is to historicize it. As scholars have shown, the construction

and consolidation of the hetero/homo binary did not occur until the middle of the 20th century in the U.S. (Chauncey 1994; Katz 1995). Katz (1995:13) argues that because heterosexuality and homosexuality have "danced in a close dialectical embrace" since the late 19th century, transformations in one category have affected changes in the other. For example, Katz argues that with the rise of the gay liberation movement in the 1970s, heterosexuality lost its unquestioned status. It was only after significant numbers of gays and lesbians started coming out of the closet that heterosexual men began writing their own defensive "heterosexual coming-out pieces." In other words, the increasing visibility of gays and lesbians led to a heightened self-consciousness about heterosexuality as a sexual orientation. Seidman (2003) found a similar heterosexual defensiveness in some of his interviews with young people about their heterosexual identity. His interviews suggest that in an environment of increasing gay visibility, some straight-identified individuals are becoming more purposeful about being seen as heterosexual. Yet Seidman's findings were contradictory: other individuals he interviewed reported being unconcerned about deliberately flagging their heterosexuality to avoid suspicions that they are gay.

My research project builds on Seidman's findings and complicates them. Seidman's interviews are an important preliminary, but inadequate, investigation into the changing meanings of heterosexual identity. For example, the young people he interviewed were primarily "gender conventional." As he acknowledges, these subjects' lack of concern about being publicly recognized as straight is unsurprising considering

the centrality of gender in sexual identity management. In a heteronormative society, conforming to gender norms is synonymous with being heterosexual in terms of how sexual identity is read in social interaction. It is unlikely that young people who are gender conventional would be called on to account for their sexual identity; therefore, managing this identity should be less of a concern for those who conform to gender norms than it is for people who deviate from them.

Masculinities, Homophobia, and Blurring Symbolic Boundaries

For sociologists operating from a symbolic interactionist framework, gender is not a set of inherent traits or the result of an essential nature rooted in biology; instead, gender is constructed and constituted through social interaction. West and Zimmerman refer to this as "doing gender": gender is enacted and constructed through daily interactions in which people manage their conduct according to "normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category" (West and Zimmerman 1987:127). In other words, gender is not something that people have; gender is something that subjects "do" in social interaction. This theoretical framework is useful because it highlights how gender must be continually reproduced in interaction, and therefore it works to denaturalize masculinity and femininity. It also points to the ways that gender norms are susceptible to challenge and change (Deutsch 2007; West and Zimmerman 2009).

A key component of the "doing gender" framework is "accountability": individuals are held accountable to conforming to norms about how women or men are supposed to behave. West and Zimmerman argue that sex category is omnirelevant. This means that the pressure to act in accordance to gender norms is present in all areas of social life – "virtually any activity can be assessed to its womanly or manly nature" (1987:136). Most people do gender "appropriately" because they know that their activities are subject to assessment by others, and therefore tend to manage their behavior with this understanding in mind. Not only do people manage their own behavior, they also police the actions of others to ensure conformity to gender norms. Failure to conform to behaviors expected of one's sex category may result in negative sanctions, such as verbal attacks, physical assaults, or shunning.[11]

As a theory rooted in feminist sociology, the "doing gender" framework has been utilized to show how gender inequality is (re)produced in social interactions (Deutsch 2007). Masculinity and femininity are not merely different, but exist in a hierarchical relationship in which traits and practices that are coded as "masculine" are more highly valued and rewarded than those coded as "feminine" (West and Zimmerman 1987). Furthermore, within this framework masculinity and femininity are conceptualized as inherently relational. As with other identities, masculine identity is constructed in opposition to groups of abject "others" (Butler 1993; Whitehead and Barrett 2001; Kimmel 2001). The repudiation of anything associated with femininity lies at the heart of masculinity (Connell 1995; Kimmel 2001). In other words, being a man means not

being like a woman. For this reason, the production of masculinity requires an anxious policing against the polluting effects of all qualities perceived as "feminine" (Pascoe 2007).

Gender relations of power exist not only between men and women, but also include hierarchies between groups of men. Raewyn Connell's (1995) work points to the relations of dominance and subordination that exist between groups of men and masculinities. Connell developed the concept "hegemonic masculinity" to describe the dominant and most valued form of masculinity within a given society. Although few men may actually embody the traits and behaviors that characterize hegemonic masculinity, this idealized form of gender serves to justify men's domination over women and other groups of men. Connell argues that "subordinated" and "marginalized" masculinities are produced in relation to hegemonic masculinity. These dominated forms of masculinity are shaped through the interplay of gender with race, class, and sexuality. For example, as Connell and others have pointed out, men of color serve as "others" against which white masculinities are constructed (Fanon 2008; Mercer 1994; Carrington 2010). The hyper-masculinity and hyper-sexuality that is attributed to and imagined to define black masculinities has served to justify the marginalization and oppression of black men and boys (Connell 1995; Ferguson 2001; Collins 2005).

In addition to men of color, gay men have been positioned as a subordinated group within the hierarchy of masculinities. Despite signs of increasing acceptance of gays and lesbians, compulsory heterosexuality remains central to contemporary forms of

hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995). For this reason, homophobia plays a key role in constructing masculinity (Messner 1992; Connell 1995; Kimmel 2001). Not only are homophobic attitudes a defining characteristic of masculinity, the use of homophobic insults serves as a disciplinary mechanism directed against boys' and men's gender nonconformity (Pascoe 2007; Hennen 2008). As C.J. Pascoe (2007) argues, the use of homophobic insults like the "fag" epithet are as much about ensuring gender conformity as they are about policing sexuality. This is because gayness is conflated with being feminine. Even though many gay men identify as normatively masculine, there is widespread belief that gay men are effeminate and are, therefore, failed men (Connell 1995; Hennen 2008). The stigmatization of gay men based on their supposed effeminacy has led feminist scholars to argue that homophobia is also misogynistic (Sedgwick 1985; Segal 1990; Kimmel 2001; Hennen 2008). In expressing contempt for and requiring the repression of the "feminine" in men, homophobic attitudes simultaneously convey contempt for women. Furthermore, the fear of being labeled as gay pushes men to exaggerate aspects of masculinity, such as the sexual objectification of women, that feminist scholars have highlighted as central to women's oppression (Kimmel 2001; Pascoe 2007).

Connell's framework conceptualizes both hegemonic masculinity and its relation to other, less valued forms of masculinity as dynamic and subject to change. She is explicit about the importance of avoiding treating masculinities as static and reified typologies (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). In other words, gender scholars should

examine the ways that masculinities change over time. Some masculinity scholars have argued that there is evidence that homophobia is less central to the construction of masculinity than it was at the time Connell developed her theory of hegemonic masculinity (Anderson 2009; McCormack 2012). Based on his ethnography of three British high schools, Mark McCormack (2012) asserts that homophobic attitudes are increasingly stigmatized amongst boys, while being pro-gay does nothing to impact boys' popularity and standing in school culture. Similarly, Eric Anderson (2009:9) argues that the social acceptability of homophobia has decreased and as a result there has been an "expansion of acceptable heteromasculine behaviors." In contrast to what he calls "orthodox masculinity," which is defined by anti-femininity and homophobia, Anderson finds evidence of an increase in "inclusive masculinity." Inclusive masculinity means that men can engage in practices that were once stereotyped as "homosexual" and "feminine" without this threatening their public identity as heterosexual.

James Joseph Dean (2014) also argues that the construction of heterosexual masculinities does not necessarily rely on homophobia. Dean challenges previous scholarship conceptualizing homophobia as central to the construction of straight masculinities. Instead, he proposes a continuum for heterosexual men's "straight identity practices" organized according to boundaries of social distance enacted between self and gay and lesbian individuals, symbols, and spaces. On one end are men who reproduce heteronormativity through talking about homosexuality as sinful or deviant and portraying gays and lesbians as gender-nonconformists. Anxious about being mistaken

as gay, these men dissociate from gay individuals, symbols, and spaces. In the middle are "non-homophobic" and "anti-homophobic" straight men who associate with gay individuals and enter gay spaces, but use women to signal straight status. Dean argues that these men subtly seek to retain straight privilege through conventional masculine practices and by "outing" themselves as straight. In the third category are anti-homophobic men who blur boundaries of social distance by engaging in gender practices coded as "gay" or "feminine." These men allow themselves to be read as gay (and thereby, according to Dean, "surrender straight privilege"), and recognize boundaries between straights and gays as fluid.

Other scholars have also noted the blurring boundary between the gendered practices of gay and straight men (Bordo 1999). The figure of the "metrosexual" provides a widely recognized cultural category that signifies these shifts in the construction of masculinities (Coad 2008; Ervin 2011). Yet an examination of the etymology of the term metrosexuality also highlights the cultural anxieties surrounding the blurring of symbolic boundaries between gay and straight men and the attempts to reconstitute these boundaries.

In his book, *The Metrosexual: Gender, Sexuality, and Sport*, David Coad (2008) traces the history, transformation, and backlash against the term "metrosexual." The term was coined by British cultural critic Mark Simpson in an article published in the *Independent* in November 1994. Simpson defined the metrosexual as a "single young man with a high disposable income, living or working in the city" who exemplified male

vanity and narcissism through their style and consumption practices (qtd. in Coad 2008:19). Simpson argued that the metrosexual's heightened attention to grooming and appearance had been pioneered by urban gay men. Furthermore, he pointed to the ways that the metrosexual's desire to be looked at by both men and women contradicted "the basic premise of traditional heterosexuality – that only women are looked at and only men do the looking" (qtd. in Coad 2008:20). While he highlights the ways that metrosexuality queers traditional heterosexual masculinity, Simpson clearly stated that metrosexuals could be gay, straight, or bisexual. Despite Simpson's incorporation of a range of sexual orientations under the term, Coad shows how marketers transformed the term to make metrosexuality synonymous with urban, heterosexual men who engaged in "feminized" consumption practices. This cemented the now dominant understanding that the term refers solely to heterosexual men. While acknowledging that some straight men are engaging in practices formerly associated with women and gay men, this transformation of the original meaning of metrosexuality serves to reaffirm the heterosexuality of these men and attempts to shore up the hetero/homo binary. Moreover, the ensuing backlash against metrosexuals spotlights the still existing anxieties provoked by the blurring of symbolic boundaries between men and women and straight and gay men (Coad 2008; Ervin 2011).

McCormack (2012), Anderson (2009), and Dean (2014) are optimistic about the effects that transformations in masculinities will have for gender relations between men and women and between straight and gay men. Yet others have questioned the

progressive nature of these changes. For example, straight men are now subject to a heightened scrutiny and an obsessive concern over their bodily appearance (Bordo 1999). And while the consumptive practices associated with metrosexuality may blur some symbolic boundaries, they also work to reproduce class and race-based hierarchies between groups of men (Barber 2008). Moreover, Demetrakis Demetriou (2001) argues that hegemonic masculinity is capable of incorporating practices once associated with gay men without challenging the domination of men over women. In fact, he contends that the incorporation of these practices makes hegemonic masculinity appear less oppressive and more egalitarian. Likewise, Tristan Bridges (2014) asserts that although heterosexual men are engaging in practices that have stereotypically been associated with gay men, this has not resulted in increased gender and sexual equality or a blurring of symbolic boundaries between gay and straight men. In fact, Bridges argues that straight men's utilization of gay aesthetics actually works to solidify symbolic boundaries by relying on an essentialist discourse that reifies particular practices as "gay." Furthermore, straight men's use of gay aesthetics allows them to appear politically progressive and to distance themselves from aspects of masculinity that are becoming increasingly stigmatized, like being overtly homophobic, while still allowing them to benefit from hetero-masculine privilege.

This project is situated within these debates about whether, and to what extent, transformations to heterosexual masculinities are occurring. Is homophobia less central to the construction of contemporary heterosexual masculinities? Have the ambiguous

straight men in my study been victims of homophobia as a result of being misread as gay? Have they been labeled as, or consider themselves to be, "metrosexuals?" Do they have to deal with the stigma of metrosexuality? Additionally, this research contributes to understandings about the politics of these transformations. The ramifications of the changing construction of heterosexual masculinities in terms of gender relations of power between men and women and between groups of men is part of my analysis.

Larger Sociological Relevance

While this project is specifically situated within the subfields of gender and sexuality, it contributes to an understanding of more general social processes and informs debates that are of interest to the wider sociological community. First, this project is relevant to literature and theorizing about the process of identity formation in the period of "late modernity." Anthony Giddens (1991) and Ulrich Beck (1992) argue that in pre-modern and early modern societies, identity formation was determined by the authority of custom, religion, the family, and the small community. In late modernity, however, these traditional sources of identity have lost their hold over the individual. As a result, identity formation becomes a reflexive process in which individuals are forced to construct a coherent sense of self from an array of lifestyle choices. In other words, identity is no longer a given dictated by custom; instead, the self becomes a project to be deliberately and continuously worked on.

Although Giddens and Beck highlight some important changes involved in the construction of the self, it is worth questioning whether their work has validity as a general theory of identity. For example, this framework has been criticized for its insufficient attention to material constraints that limit individuals' ability to reflexively construct self-identity (May and Cooper 1995; Skeggs 2004). In other words, these theories implicitly assume a white, middle-class subject living in an over-developed Western nation. In addition to eliding class differences, this theoretical framework may overlook the specificities related to the reflexive construction of other identity categories. Is the reflexive construction of racial identity similar to the reflexive construction of sexual identity? Even if we accept that the self is a project to be worked on, social actors must confront the historically sedimented meanings that attach to identity categories. For example, biracial people in the United States must contend with the historical legacy of the "one-drop" rule as they negotiate their racial identity in interaction with others (Khanna and Johnson 2010). Likewise, "feminine" men who identify as straight must confront the historical legacy of the gender inversion model of homosexuality as they negotiate their sexual identity (Heasley 2005).

Second, this research contributes to our understanding of the construction and transformation of symbolic boundaries. Michele Lamont and Vigar Molnar (2002:168) define symbolic boundaries as "conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space." In this project, I focus on the symbolic boundaries that have been constructed between straight and gay men, how

these boundaries are being transformed, and how subjects are negotiating these transformations. While my specific questions address the hetero/homo binary, this project can highlight more general social processes related to boundary making.

Finally, this research also examines the effects of the transformations to identity categories brought about by social movements. As I noted earlier, the gay rights movement altered what it means to be gay by challenging pathologizing medical discourses and asserting that gay people should be out and proud. Yet social movement activism by subordinated groups also transforms the identities of the members of dominant categories. What happens when a formerly stigmatized identity becomes normalized as a result of social movement activism? How does the increasing acceptance of a formerly stigmatized group affect the people who Goffman (1963), with tongue planted firmly in cheek, calls "we normals?"

Conclusion

This research project is premised upon a social constructionist approach to studying sexuality and gender. This means that sexuality and gender are not assumed to be pre-social, innate, or biologically determined phenomena, but are understood as produced in social interactions, through discourse, and in relationship to social institutions. While sexualities research has tended to focus on the history and changing meanings of gay and lesbian identities, less attention has been paid to heterosexual

identities. By focusing on the construction of straight identities, this project contributes to critical heterosexuality studies, a subfield that works to "denaturalize" heterosexuality by drawing attention to the ways it is constructed as normal, natural, and dominant in relationship to homosexuality (Ingraham 1999). This research is also situated within and contributes to current debates in the field of critical studies of men and masculinities. These debates center around questions of how, and to what extent, hetero-masculinities are opening up to incorporate practices previously considered "feminine" or "gay," and how to interpret the political ramifications of these transformations in regards to gender and sexual inequality (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). In the following chapter, I explain my research methods and study design, while elaborating on how this dissertation contributes to the study of gender and sexuality.

Notes for Chapter Two

[1] This opposition between "sex" and the "social" is illustrated by sexologists' "hydraulic" model of sexuality: sex is an overpowering force of nature, like a gushing stream, that should be channeled in appropriate directions by social institutions. Both conservative moralists' and sexual liberationists' stances on sexuality relied upon the dualism between "sex" and "society" exemplified by the "hydraulic" model. For conservatives, sexuality is a dangerous drive that threatens social stability, and therefore it must be restrained by social institutions. For sexual liberationists, sexuality needs to be freed from repressive social forces (Weeks 1985).

[2] That people experience their identities as fixed and stable does not mean there really is an underlying "essence" to sexuality. As Valocchi (2005:754) argues, the experience of a stable, coherent identity "does not invalidate the constructed nature of these categories. It simply attests to the ideological power of categorical thinking and the modernist assumption of coherent selves."

[3] This rejection of an underlying, biological sexual truth and a shift in focus to the social production of sexuality addresses a fundamental weakness inherent in reducing "sex" to instinctual drives. Theories of sexuality based on the assumption of a universal and innate sexual drive inadequately explain sexual diversity and social change (Stein 1989).

[4] Of course it should be noted that categorizing some sexual practices as "natural" and others as "unnatural" is inherently political and is a primary tactic used by both those in favor of and those opposed to gay rights (Lancaster 2003). What I am arguing here is that a preoccupation with discovering the origins of sexual desire, especially under the assumption that the "truth" of sex lies in biology, distracts from larger questions about sexual politics that are opened up by a focus on sexual regimes.

[5]Again, as Katz (1995) points out, these arguments were not Foucault's alone. An interest in the history of homosexuality was also emerging within the gay, lesbian and feminist movements in the 1970s.

[6]This distinction is not confined to the early 20th century. Roger Lancaster's (1988) research on sexual categories in Nicaragua shows that men who are the "active," or instertive, partner in same-sex practices are not stigmatized for engaging in sexual acts with other men. In fact, the "active" subject may even accrue masculine capital for having sex with the "passive," or receptive, partner, known in local dialect as a "cochon." This feminized "cochon" is shamed for being the passive "object" within these sexual acts.

[7] Seidman et al. (1999) argue that the closet was not only repressive, but also produced "protected" places – like gay bars – that allowed individuals to fashion a gay self-identity.

[8]The term "post-Stonewall" refers to the period after the Stonewall riots. The Stonewall riots were a series of spontaneous demonstrations by members of the gay community against police oppression of gay people. These demonstrations were sparked by a police raid on the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar located in the Greenwich Village neighborhood in New York City, that occurred on June 28, 1969. The riots are considered to be a major turning point in the gay rights movement, ushering in a new period of militancy in gay rights activism.

[9] When discussing heteronormativity, queer theorists tend to focus on discourse while sociologists tend to highlight the institutionalization of heterosexuality (Valocchi 2005).

[10] For example, no one asks heterosexual people to explain when they realized they were straight or how their parents reacted to their heterosexuality.

[11] Of course it should be pointed out that gender norms are not only experienced as constrictive. Acting in accordance to gender norms can also occur because the maintenance of gender identity is important to many individuals (West and Zimmerman 1987).

Chapter Three: Research Methods

In this chapter I outline the methods employed in this study. I begin with a discussion of the research questions that guided the project and explain why I chose to interview straight-identified men who claim to be perceived as gay. Next, I describe the research design of the study. In this section I give details about data collection and analysis, recruitment methods, sample demographics, and location of the study. I then turn to an exploration of the limitations of the study, followed by a statement about ethical issues, and a discussion about my positionality.

Research Questions and Case Selection

The following questions guided this research project:

1. How do ambiguous straight men "manage" their sexual identity? Do they try to prove or demonstrate their heterosexuality? If so, how? Is their heterosexuality a central component of their identity?
2. How does heterosexual privilege benefit, or fail to benefit, ambiguous heterosexuals?
3. How do the politics of the closet affect ambiguous straight men?

4. What kinds of identity management do the partners of these ambiguous straight men engage in? Do they try to "shore up" their partner's identity as a heterosexual? Do they openly embrace the ambiguity? Is their own sexuality also called into question?

These questions are motivated by an interest in mapping some of the ways that straight men's identities have been impacted by the increasing visibility and acceptance of gays and lesbians in American culture (see Chapter 2: Literature Review and Sociological Relevance for a fuller discussion of this literature).

In order to address my research questions, I studied straight-identified men who claimed to be perceived as gay. As discussed in the literature review, this project is situated within debates in masculinity studies about the form and meanings of transformations in contemporary hetero-masculinities. For this reason, I focused primarily on men's experiences. Three women who claimed to be read as gay were also interviewed, as I discuss later in the chapter when I describe my sample. The call for respondents was not limited to cisgender men.[1] While I was open to interviewing straight-identified cisgender men and transgender men, my sample, to the best of my knowledge, includes only cisgender men.

There are several justifications for studying this particular subset of straight-identified men. First, examining those who "deviate" from norms is a useful way of clarifying the boundaries of "the normal." Steph Lawler (2008:144), capturing this

sociological truism, writes, "It is perhaps when an identity is seen to 'fail' that we see most clearly the social values that dictate how an identity ought to be." By definition, the men in my study "fail" in one way or another to convey a heterosexual identity. While heterosexuality may be the unmarked and taken-for-granted sexual identity category for most people (Richardson 1996), this is not case for the people I interviewed. As Betsy Lucal (1999) argues in regards to gender, those who fit gender norms can often take them for granted, while those who deviate face social consequences. This same argument can be made for those who are "misread" as gay: their heterosexuality is not taken-for-granted. Instead, they are sometimes called on to account for their sexual identities and their gender presentation, as my interviews illustrate.

Second, as scholars who study identity point out, identities involve both self-identity and identification by others. By definition the subjects in my study sometimes experience conflict between their self-identity (straight) and the identity attributed to them by others (gay). As Goffman (1963) would argue, these subjects contend with the discrepancy between a "virtual social identity" and their "actual social identity." Virtual social identity refers to the attributes that members of a category are expected to possess, while actual social identity refers to the attributes that subjects can be proved to possess. In this case, some of the men I interviewed do not conform – their actual social identity – to the normative expectations of the category "heterosexual man," which is a virtual social identity. This raises interesting questions about how these men manage this discrepancy in social interactions. Do they try to demonstrate that they are "really"

straight? And if so, how do they do this? Are they okay with being identified as gay? Why or why not? I address these questions more substantively in Chapters 4, 5, and 6.

Third, we know very little about the experiences of this particular group of men. Part of the reason for this is that straight men who are perceived as gay are often not granted social legitimacy (Heasley 2005). One way that their experiences are erased is through a discourse of the closet: they are simply assumed to be "closet cases" or "latent homosexuals" who lack the courage to come out of the closet, as the Bachmann example in the introduction illustrates. As I explore in Chapter 5, ambiguous straights are often put in the closet by members of straight and gay communities. An examination of these kinds of experiences heightens our understanding of how the politics of the closet affects not only members of the LGBTQ community, but straight-identified people as well.

In addition to interviewing straight-identified men who are "read" as gay, I also interviewed participants' romantic partners when possible. This decision was driven by the epistemological assumption that identities are socially produced through interaction. In other words, identities are not inherent, but are interactional accomplishments that require recognition and support by others (Goffman 1959; Berger & Luckmann 1966). In this case, ambiguous straight men sometimes receive validation of their sexuality from female partners, while also using their partner to symbolically demonstrate to others that they are in fact heterosexual. However, being in a relationship with a woman does not necessarily guarantee social recognition of a man's heterosexual identity. In some instances, the women were categorized as "beards," "fag hags," or simply "dupes" who

failed to recognize they were in a relationship with a closeted gay man. These cultural tropes can function as a means of delegitimizing men's claims to a heterosexual identity even when they are in an intimate relationship with a woman. For this reason, female partners of ambiguously straight men engaged in forms of identity management both for themselves and on behalf of their partner. Conducting interviews with the female partners of some of the men in my study also allowed for triangulation, meaning I could compare the men's accounts with those of their partner, which sometimes pointed to contradictions that were useful for analysis (Lofland et al. 2006).

Research Design

My analysis is based on data collected through life history interviews I conducted with 23 straight-identified individuals (20 men and three women) who claim to be read as gay in social interactions. I also conducted life history interviews with four women married to men who participated in the study. Interviews with the men and their partners were conducted separately. Although there are potential benefits of conducting joint interviews with couples, I was concerned that the men might not feel comfortable discussing past and current sexual experiences and desires with their partner present (Allen 1980; Beitin 2008).

Life history interviews provide documentation of subjective experiences and everyday understandings of gender and sexuality (Weston 1996; Stein 1997). By

focusing on a "history," these interviews also allow the researcher to document changes that have occurred throughout the subject's life (Connell 1995). For example, the meanings and experience of being "mistaken for gay" varied for respondents according to life stages, location of residence, relationship status, and so on. Furthermore, life history interviews not only provide data about subjective, personal life, they also offer observations about the broader social context, including social structures and institutions, which play a role in the construction of sexual identity categories (Connell 1995; Weston 1996).

The interviews were semi-structured, which means I used an interview guide but did not follow a strict ordering of the questions. There were three general sections to the interview: a set of biographical questions, a set of questions about how the subject understands their sexual and gender identity, and a set of questions about being "mistaken" for gay. (See Appendices I and II for complete Interview Guides). Participant responses to the open-ended questions shaped the direction of the interviews. The duration of the interviews ranged from one to two hours. All but two of the interviews were conducted in-person at local coffee shops. Two interviews were conducted by telephone because the respondents did not reside in Austin. All of the interviews were recorded, with the permission of the participant, and then transcribed for analysis. I also wrote down notes immediately after the interview to capture a description of the participant and my initial impressions of the interview. My analysis of the transcribed interviews began with a process of open coding that involved reading the

transcripts line-by-line to identify general themes. Once these general themes were catalogued, I conducted a more focused coding for each theme that was guided by my theoretical interests (Esterberg 2002).

I recruited respondents through flyers posted in local businesses in Austin, TX, postings on the Austin craigslist, and through snowball sampling. Twelve subjects in this study responded to a flyer that asked, "Are you ever mistaken for being gay? Would you like to share your experience?" (See Appendix III for a copy of the recruitment flyer). The majority responded to flyers that had been posted at coffee shops. One respondent saw the flyer on the University of Texas at Austin campus, another responded to one at an auto repair shop, and another saw it at a waxing studio. Only one interview resulted from the craigslist ad. The remaining 13 interview subjects were recruited through word-of-mouth and snowball sampling. Snowball sampling involves asking people that I interviewed to refer me to friends and acquaintances who might also be appropriate to interview (Lofland et al. 2006). Although this strategy of recruitment has the disadvantage of drawing upon networks of people who may share similar characteristics, it is often the best way to find people in "hidden" populations (Esterberg 2002).

The Location

All of the respondents except for two resided in Austin, TX at the time of the study. As I argue throughout the dissertation, experiences of gender and sexuality are

highly contextual. The location of the study was not insignificant in terms of my findings. The unofficial motto of Austin is "Keep Austin Weird," which points to the city's reputation as a haven for non-conformists and eccentrics. The city is imagined to be tolerant and accepting of cultural diversity (Long 2010; Tate 2015). Of course much of this is relative to the way the state of Texas is imagined. Austin is often described as a "blue island in a sea of red," or a liberal oasis in a politically conservative state.

Austin is also the fastest growing large city in the United States. As the population has skyrocketed so has the cost of living. Due to the rising cost of living and a lack of affordable housing, working class families have been increasingly displaced from Austin neighborhoods (Tate 2015). The rapid influx of newcomers is reflected in my sample. Only four people in my sample were born and raised in Austin. Two grew up in the same small town 45 minutes outside of Austin but have lived in the city for over a decade. The rest of the people in my sample moved to the city within the last five years. My interviews capture how respondents' experiences related to their gender and sexuality changed as they moved to Austin. Respondents' perceptions of Austin's culture were influenced by where they moved from. For participants who grew up in small towns in the Midwest, moving to Austin was described as liberating in terms of its tolerance for a range of gender expression. Respondents who had spent time on the West Coast saw Austin as less progressive and tolerant in comparison – yes, they told me, Austin may be liberal compared to the rest of Texas, but as a couple respondents said, "It's still Texas." Although the study was situated in Austin, the life history method of

interviewing meant that respondents talked about experiences with being read as gay in a range of geographical locales.

The Sample

I interviewed 20 men and three women who claimed to be mistaken for gay. One woman was recruited through word-of-mouth. The other two women responded to my flyer. As you can in Appendix III, the flyer asks in large letters, "Are you ever mistaken for being gay? Would you like to share your experience?" In the smaller print, I specify that I am conducting research about men. For the most part, I focus my analysis on the experiences of men, though one woman does figure prominently in my discussion of straight people's experiences with homophobia in Chapter 5. The men in the study ranged from 23 years-old to 50 years-old. The majority of the men were in their late 20s to early 30s, with an average age of 32 years-old. Two of the women were 32 and the other was 38. All of the women and 20 of the men in the study are white, while three of the men identified their race/ethnicity as "Hispanic." In terms of class, the majority of respondents could be classified as coming from lower-middle to middle class backgrounds, even though many of them are currently engaged in service industry jobs. Three respondents explicitly talked about growing up working class. Reported incomes ranged from $0 (yet this respondent was a "homemaker" whose wife made "six figures" as a lawyer) to $400,000, which was an outlier. The median income was $30,000. In

terms of highest level of education, one respondent listed high school, six had some college, two had associate's degrees, nine had bachelor's degrees, four had master's degrees, and one had an MD. Eight of the men were married, two were in relationships with women, and ten were single. Of the three women who claimed to be mistaken for gay, one was in a relationship with a man and the other two were single. Four of the married men had children, the rest of the men and women were childless. (See Appendix IV for a complete list of respondents).

While half of the twenty men in the study were in relationships, I only ended up interviewing four partners. One man told me that all of his "mistaken for gay" stories occurred when he was in his teens and early twenties and as a result his wife, who he met in his mid-twenties, would not have any stories to tell me. In two cases participants said that their partners would participate but they never responded to my emails requesting an interview. In the remaining cases, men told me that their partners were either too busy or uninterested in doing the interview. The partners who participated were all married, and all four were white women. Their ages were 29, 30, 32, and 37. Two had doctoral degrees, one had a master's degree, and the other had a bachelor's degree. Their incomes ranged from $43,000 - $61,000. Two of them had children and one woman was pregnant at the time of the interview. While these interviews offered a context for some of my analysis, I do not write explicitly about these interviews in this dissertation.

I hoped for a more racially diverse sample but ended up with one that was almost entirely comprised of white men and women. I can only speculate as to why this

occurred. An obvious explanation has to do with recruiting: several participants were recruited through my existing social networks in the Austin indie music scene, which is predominately white. One possible explanation for why only white men responded to my flyers is that gayness is largely associated with whiteness in American culture (Berube 2003; Ross 2005). For example, gay men represented in popular media are almost always white gay men (Walters 2001). Because gay men are imagined to be white, I suspect that being mistaken as gay might be more of an issue for white men than men of color. Furthermore, as I discuss in the next chapter, the men in my study argued that they were mistaken as being gay on account of their effeminacy. As noted in the literature review, black men are already imagined to be hypermasculine, regardless of their actual gender traits (Mercer 1994; McCune 2014). In contrast, while Asian men have been hypermasculinized at points in American history, they are also stereotyped in American culture as feminine and sexless (Shek 2006; Lu and Wong 2013). This stereotype was illustrated in one interview by Jon, a 25 year-old white respondent, who was discussing dancing as a feminine activity: "I think the most feminine interest I have is dancing, but there's lots of dudes that like to dance. Some little like breakdancing dude, you don't immediately think he's straight, you usually think he's Asian. That's usually what he is – Asian. Asian dudes, they're not necessarily the most masculine people." As this quote illustrates, perceptions of gender are racialized. As Asian men are already expected to be feminine, effeminacy is viewed as a sign of their essentialized racial otherness, as opposed to being a sign of same-sex desire, as it is for white men.

While my primarily white sample is a limitation of the study, I highlight the ways that my respondents' whiteness relates to their experiences with being read as gay. An intersectional analysis entails thinking about the ways that all of my respondents' race and class positions impact their experience of and the meanings they attribute to their gender and sexuality. An underlying assumption guiding this project is that gender and sexuality are always raced and classed and that these multiple axes of identity cannot be isolated or reduced to independent variables. This assumption remains central in my analysis and interpretation of my interview data.

Limitations and Caveats

As with all research, there are limitations to this project in addition to the lack of racial and ethnic diversity of my sample. Some of these limitations are inherent in the methodological tools that I employed to collect the data and are general to all projects based on in-depth interviewing, while others are specific to the particularities of this research project. In addition to the methodological limitations, I also have political concerns that this project could be interpreted in ways that run counter to my anti-homophobic and feminist intentions.

One methodological issue and limitation stems from the method of recruitment. The obvious questions are: "*Who* are these men?" and "*How* will you find them?" Since I relied on flyers and snowball sampling for recruitment, the subjects in this sample are

limited to straight-identified people who know, or think, that they are "read" as gay and were willing to be interviewed. For positivists, this project is fundamentally biased by what these researchers would call a "selection effect" (Babbie 2012). Yet all social science research, even random samples selected for survey research, is affected by who is willing to participate. Moreover, this project is not driven by a positivist epistemology. I am not attempting to produce statistically generalizable results about the percentage of men who think they are misread or averages of how often these "misreadings" occur and how this changes when controlling for a series of variables. This project is more accurately described as constructivist and interpretivist sociology (Stein 1997; Plummer 2001). In other words, I am more concerned with the construction of social categories and interpreting the effects, both in the everyday lives of social actors and in terms of the larger political ramifications, of these categories.

As a result of my recruitment method, however, there is a danger that this research implicitly suggests that assuming a heterosexual identity is only problematic for men who know or think that they are misread. I do not believe or intend to suggest that this is the case. There is a large body of literature that details both the incessant policing of masculinity that occurs amongst diverse groups of men and highlights the connection between this gender policing and homophobia (Messner 1992; Pascoe 2007; Phoenix et al. 2003; Plummer 2001; Burn 2000). I also take from psychoanalytic theory, even though this project itself is not situated within this tradition, the important insight that all identities are characterized by ambivalence that stems from unconscious psychological

processes such as repression, splitting, and projection (Fanon 2008; Weeks 1985; McClintock 1995). My assumption though, and reason for selecting this "case," is that ambiguously "straight" men are likely to be more conscious of and articulate about their claims to a heterosexual identity than men who are not called on to account for their sexuality. This is precisely because they do not necessarily benefit from the heteronormative assumption that everyone is straight until proven otherwise. Although they may appear to be atypical, this group of men serve as "key informants" that shed light on the more general ways that meanings about heterosexuality have been transformed as a result of increasing gay visibility (Hammersley 1992; Plummer 2001). Moreover, the fear and/or experience of being misread as "gay" is not an esoteric phenomenon. The theme of straight men being mistaken for gay is a gag used in numerous comedies and sitcoms (Walters 2001). One of the most memorable examples involves a *Seinfeld* episode in which Jerry Seinfeld panics in response to being misread as gay, while quickly adding the disclaimer, "Not that there's anything wrong with that," after his disavowal of a gay identity. This demonstrates that the phenomenon under examination is already recognized and portrayed in popular culture.

Another concern worth addressing is that this project will be read as an attempt to expose and out "closet cases," which would make me complicit in the very processes that I am critiquing. What if my respondents discussed their sexual desires for men or sexual practices they have engaged in with men? What if the majority of men in my study do come out as gay in the future? Does this invalidate my research? As the careful reader

will have noticed, throughout this proposal I use the term "straight-identified" or place "straight" in quotations to indicate that I am not interested in whether or not the men in my study are "really" heterosexual. Furthermore, research has already shown that people do make distinctions *in practice* between their sexual identities, desires, and acts (Laumann et al. 1994; Savins-Williams 2006). In other words, someone might identify as heterosexual, have desires for people of the same sex, but not engage in sexual acts with members of the same sex. Or a man could identify as heterosexual while still engaging in sexual acts with other men (Ward 2008). While I asked my subjects questions about sexual desires and practices, the primary focus of this project is on sexual identity categories – both how these men identify and are identified by others.

Related to the question of "truth," I should also make it clear that I am not interested in whether the men in my study "really" are read as gay. This project is, in a sense, about perceptions of perceptions. This limitation should be acknowledged but it does not undermine the goals of this research. As we know from social psychology, identity and self-perception are always influenced by what people *believe* others think about them, which is the central argument behind Cooley's (1902) concept of the looking-glass self.

The flipside of this project being interpreted as an attempt to out "closet cases" is that it could be dismissed as an example of "heterosexual defensiveness" (Katz 1995; Connell 1995; Seidman 2003). This would mean attempting to prove that these men "really" are straight in order to defend and recuperate their sexuality. Interestingly, I

believe some men viewed the study as a way of validating their straightness. I am not, however, making claims about the "Truth" of these subjects' sexuality. Additionally, questions of power and privilege are central to my analysis. Avowing a straight identity is not equivalent to avowing a gay identity in a homophobic culture. I was aware of this as I investigated men's attachments to a heterosexual identity and as I analyzed their stories.

As should be clear, I am less concerned with the "truth" of sexual identity categories than I am with the way that these categories work or, as Sedgwick (2008:27) defines her strategy in *Epistemology of the Closet*, with "what enactments they are preforming and what relations they are creating." This is an investigation into the ways that sexual classifications exert an influence on people's lives, while bracketing the question of the "truth" regarding these classifications (Green 2002). By utilizing in-depth interviews, I examine the ways that people make sense of and draw on these classificatory schemes. As Ken Plummer (1995:172) argues, the sexual stories that will be told in these interviews should be analyzed in terms of their pragmatic consequences, as opposed to their truthfulness: "Stories help people to say certain things at certain times and in certain places, and likewise not to say them at others. Sexual stories can…be examined for the roles they play in lives, in contexts, in social order."

I will also not be treating the stories that subjects tell in the interviews as the "Truth" of their experience. The behaviors that people report in interviews do not always reveal what people actually do in their day-to-day lives (Jerolmack & Khan 2014). The

interviews themselves will be analyzed as an interactional process in which subjects are engaging in forms of impression management (Stein 1997). This does not mean that interviews tell us nothing about how subjects make sense of the world, but that analyzing and interpreting the accounts given in interviews requires attention to context: "the presupposition on which it relies, how it was produced, by who, for whom, and why" (Hammersely and Atkinson 2007:98).

Ethical Issues

I took ethical concerns seriously as I conducted this research. All participants were given an IRB-approved consent form and all respondents gave verbal consent prior being interviewed. Respondents also gave consent for the interview to be recorded. In addition to obtaining informed consent, I took the steps necessary to ensure confidentiality. This meant protecting documents that contain information that could be used to identify the subjects, and utilizing pseudonyms to conceal the identity of the participants in this dissertation. In some instances I changed details, such as occupation, that could possibly be used to identify specific participants.

My Positionality

As a researcher, I am committed to producing reflexive sociology. This means that I reject the idea that it is possible for me to engage in this project as an objective,

neutral researcher producing "value-free" research. In contrast to the view of the researcher as a neutral, disembodied observer, I recognize that ascribed characteristics such as my race, class, and gender, and my achieved characteristics, such as being a researcher associated with a major research university, will impact my interactions with the subjects of my research (Stein 1997; Esterberg 2002). Reflexivity entails a critical awareness of the way that my positionality affects the type of data that I collect and incorporating this into my analysis, and not merely as a way of minimizing or controlling this impact (Marcus 1998).

In terms of the specifics of this project, I do belong, in some ways, to the group of men that I studied. Although I have only been in relationships with women, I am sometimes read as gay man. This actually came up at the end of an interview when a respondent, who was a casual acquaintance, admitted, somewhat hesitantly, that he thought I was gay when he first met me. When I asked why, he said it was because I was "nice" and I "talked a lot." He said that he only realized I was not gay when he discovered I was in a relationship with a woman. While I am not invested in identifying as a "straight" man, and in fact would more accurately identify as "queer" on account of my gender presentation and politics, I have often had the experience of "outing" myself as heterosexual to people who were sure that I was gay.[2] In my case, I would argue that several signifiers lead others to assume that I am gay: my style, particularly my haircut and clothing; mannerisms which defy hetero-masculine norms, such as expressive gestures with my hands while talking; and finally, my interest in studying gender and

sexuality. It is difficult, if not impossible, to discuss the ways in which my own ambiguous sexuality will affect my interactions with my subjects. When respondents asked, I did acknowledge that I had my own experiences with being perceived as gay. I believe that this helped increase rapport. In fact, some scholars have suggested that the appearance of similarity between researchers and subjects aids in the development of rapport (Esterberg 2002, Leblanc 1999). On the one hand, it is easy to imagine that some respondents felt comfortable discussing issues around gender and sexual identity because I do not conform to hegemonic masculinity. On the other hand, it is entirely possible that some respondents read me as gay and feared that I am trying to prove that they are in fact a "closet case."

Conclusion

In this chapter I described my research design and provided a rationale for conducting life history interviews with straight-identified men and, when possible, their female partners. In the remainder of the dissertation, I report on my findings from these life history interviews. I approached these interviews as "sexual stories" that offer insights into how people make sense of sexual and gender categories, while also highlighting how these categories are and are not changing in light of the increasing visibility and acceptance of gay and lesbian people. In the next chapter, I focus on how the men in my study describe their gender and the relationship between their gender and

perceptions of their sexuality, while paying attention to the ways these stories are shaped by class and race.

Notes for Chapter Three

[1] Cisgender is a term that refers to people who have a match between the gender they were assigned at birth and the gender they identify as.

[2] Like Eve Sedgwick (2008:xvii), I feel as if I can "neither disavow nor claim a gay orientation."

Chapter Four: "I'm effeminate. I recognize that. I embrace that:" Feminine Straight Men and the Conflation of Gender and Sexuality

A few days after my recruitment flyers had been posted around Austin I received an email that began, "Several friends have sent me photos of your flyer on UT's campus, sooooo [sic] I'm thinking we should chat :)." I met the sender two weeks later at a coffee shop for what turned out to be a fascinating interview. Sean, a 27 year-old white man, arrived to the interview slightly late and damp with sweat. He apologized for both and explained that he had traveled by bike. Sean is about 6'1" and slightly beefy. He had a five o'clock shadow, even though it was ten in the morning, and his dark brown hair was neatly-coiffed with long slicked-back bangs, which he ran his hand through at several points during the interview. His hairstyle elongated his oval face and revealed a slightly receding hairline. He was dressed in a pink and mauve striped tank-top, tight cut-off black jean shorts that end a couple inches above the knee, and flip-flops. Although dressed casually – and appropriately for the Texas summer heat – at our interview, I noticed in professional photos online that Sean's sartorial style and expensive salon haircut come closest, out of all the men in my study, to approximating the stereotypical image of the metrosexual. In contrast to the initial nervousness I detected from several interviewees, Sean came across as confident and gregarious from the moment he sat down at the table. I immediately felt a sense of rapport, which was aided by the discovery that both of us are from northern Indiana and had attended Purdue University as undergraduates.

When I asked how he found out about the project, Sean laughed, and his large hazel eyes twinkled, as he explained that two friends texted him photos of my flyer within the same hour. Even though his friends worried that this might offend him, he told me that "it really [laughed] kind of cracked me up:" "One of them was like, 'I'm sorry, does this offend you?' [laughs] I was like, 'No, not at all!' 'cause I'm very open about this, about this in my life, so it was just really funny. I was like, you know 10 years ago I would have been concerned about something like that, but now it's just a funny thing that happens." In fact, Sean *is* "very open" about being mistaken for gay, or what he refers to as the "not gay thing", and his career is centered on this phenomenon. Sean described himself as a "social justice comedian" – he makes a living performing a comedy show, primarily at universities, in which he talks about how stereotypes, or what he calls "snap judgements," lead to oppression. His show largely focuses on gender and sexuality and his jokes draw from his personal experiences of being read as gay. When asked why he decided to participate in the study, he said, "I've joked for a long time about this thing happening, the 'not gay thing' I call it because it's not really, it's not universal in any way. Like everybody experiences it in weird, different ways and I've always joked about creating like a little 'not gay' community [laughs], like a 'not gay' support group [laughs]." In addition to his comedy show, Sean has written a book that attempts to explain social constructionist theories about gender and sexuality to a popular audience. Needless to say, Sean's knowledge and self-reflexivity about gender and sexuality surpassed that of most of the people I interviewed.

When I asked Sean to give examples of times he had been mistaken as gay, he replied, "Oh my gosh! Yeah, I've got a word document that I started about a year and a half ago, so this isn't even comprehensive, but I just started writing down the times when people misread me as gay. It's up to like 260 unique things." When I laughed and raised my eyebrows at what sounded like a strange and unhealthy obsession, Sean justified the list as being "material" for his comedy routine and writings on gender and sexuality. In response to my inquiry about items on this list, he said:

> I've got them broken down into categories like lifestyle choices, like if I know the lyrics to *Wicked*, or whatever. And then like ways that I act, ways that I dress, and um then there's this one and I just call it "wildcards." So for example I was doing a comedy show a couple months ago and after the show…this like 14 or 15 year-old girl was like, "I'll tell you how I knew you were gay!", 'cause I tell some stories on stage about people misreading me as gay, and I was like, "Well, first of all you missed the point [laughs] so let's hear it [laughs]." And she goes, "You've got a gay forehead." And I was like, "What does that mean?" And she was like, "Well not your forehead, but like if you were to peel your skin back and look at the skull, and then take a bunch of gay people and look at their skulls I bet you'd have the same foreheads." I'm like, "Oh my god! You just invented phrenology – that's terrifying." [laughs]. Let's lock you up preemptively. [laughs]

After being briefly sidetracked by this story, he continued giving examples on the list:

> So like the way that I dress, my hair, my eyebrows [laughs] - like these are all different people. Someone said my lips – like that I have gay lips. And I don't know what that means. Fingernails – pretty much every aspect of my physical self [laughs]. Other than my legs – I have very straight legs, someone told me once, which is weird. So that's funny. And then people will tell me why they knew I was straight, which is like the next level of this, which is even weirder. And then like my interests – like I talk about musical theater and dancing and stuff like that. My mannerisms, my voice, the words that I use, uh people say that I "talk good" [said in mocking voice] [laughs]. So um, I smell good.

While Sean is certainly unique in his recording and cataloging of these instances, his experience of being "misread as gay" for the reasons listed above is shared by several men I interviewed for this study. Regarding this list, Sean asserted, "I read them and I like think they're hilarious." Yet, he quickly added, "They're remnants of a sad culture and like a kind of oppressive culture that we live in."

Sean contends that he is not bothered, and is mostly amused, when people "misread" him as gay, although this was not always the case. As an undergraduate, he was especially alarmed by "mistaken for gay" incidents and worried that these might be

accurate perceptions of his sexuality. He said that he often found himself coming out as straight or "not gay." After visiting the gender and sexuality resource center on his college campus, Sean said he realized that being perceived as gay had "nothing to do with my sexuality and pretty much everything to do with my gender." Sean describes himself as a "feminine person." He hopes that speaking publicly about his experiences will help expand the boundaries of what it means to be a straight man by demonstrating that men can be heterosexual *and* feminine.

Masculinities scholars have found evidence that heterosexual masculinity is changing to be more inclusive of practices that have been stereotyped as "gay" or "feminine" (Barber 2008; Anderson 2009; McCormack 2012; Dean 2013; Bridges 2014). However, straight men's engagement in these practices tends to be described by these scholars as indicating new configurations of hetero-masculinities, as opposed to being conceptualized as new forms of male femininity. This is unsurprising given that the study of masculinity tends to be reduced to what boys and men do. As critics have pointed out, defining masculinity as "what men do" reifies differences between men and women while leading researchers to overlook female masculinity, or women's embodiment of masculinity and engagement in practices coded as "masculine" (Halberstam 1998; Schippers 2007; Pascoe 2007). It has also meant that male femininity has been largely ignored and has remained under-theorized (Schippers 2007).

When male femininity is discussed in gender studies literature, it tends to be in relation to effeminate gay men. For example, in *How to be Gay*, David Halperin (2012)

argues that gay male femininity must be analyzed as its own unique phenomenon, as a particular formation of gender and sexuality that is distinct from femininity performed by women, that signifies a dissident relationship to mainstream gender norms. Halperin also argues that one need not be gay in order to participate in and express identification with gay cultural practices, including gay femininity. In other words, he acknowledges that straight men can and do engage in gay cultural practices. Despite this recognition, however, there is no analysis of straight men's femininity in his book. To be fair, Halperin's aim is to theorize about gay male subjectivity. Moreover, even his brief acknowledgments of the existence of straight feminine men moves beyond their usual invisibility in both gender studies and contemporary popular culture at large.

In the introduction, I argued that examining the public discourse surrounding Marcus Bachmann is useful for highlighting how the glass closet works to erase the possibility that men can be effeminate and still desire women, but there are particularities to this case that warrant further discussion. Bachmann became a target for ridicule because he is a public figure who espouses anti-gay views. His homophobia and conservative social politics place him in the crosshairs for a particularly virulent form of speculation about his sexuality. And although being homophobic is often believed to be a sign of repressed same-sex desire, Bachmann, an Evangelical Christian, utilizes his religious beliefs to justify his anti-gay politics. Given these specificities, it is worth questioning whether the Bachmann case is representative of the experiences of other "feminine" men who identify as straight.

In this chapter, I draw upon life history interviews to show how the glass closet phenomenon plays out in the everyday lives of straight-identified men who are not in the public eye. I begin by explaining what it means when the men in my study describe themselves as feminine or effeminate. For the purposes of this chapter, I define *male femininity* as men's engagement in practices and/or embodiment of characteristics that are culturally ascribed to women, and are therefore coded as "feminine." Next, I show how the meanings of male femininity are inflected through classed and racialized experiences. I conclude with an exploration of how "feminine" straight men negotiate the conflation of gender and sexuality in American culture.

"More Feminine than Masculine:" Attributes of Male Femininity

As I argued in the introduction, male femininity continues to be construed as an indisputable sign of same-sex desire in American culture. For this reason, it is unsurprising that many of the men in my study described themselves as either "feminine" or "effeminate" when I asked them to talk about their gender presentation. Sean, who was introduced at the start of this chapter, said he considers himself a "feminine person." When asked why he described himself as "feminine," he replied:

> For a lot of reasons – okay, my voice, the way that I speak, the way that I approach people in a very deferent way. Um so other ways, the way that I dress, I

> would say I dress femininely, the way that I take care of my hair, or any other grooming stuff , I would say would be more feminine. And the way, I mean my hand gestures, just a lot of things that are / that I've realized are very subconscious that I do are just read as more feminine than masculine. I don't have swagger, you know?

In fact, Sean's way of speaking could be categorized as stereotypically feminine on account of his "uptalk," which refers to a rising intonation at the end of a phrase or sentence. This manner of speaking gives the impression that the speaker is asking a question even when they are making a declarative statement. In popular discourse, uptalk is primarily associated with young women, and is believed to connote a lack of confidence. Regarding his style, Sean self-identifies as metrosexual, a point I discuss later in the chapter. He talked about wearing slim-fitting pants, V-neck shirts, and colorful clothing – "I like colors, like I think colors are just for fun."

Jared, a 30-year-old white man who grew up in a small town outside of Austin, identifies with goth subculture and his sartorial style could be described as Edwardian dandy. He is tall and rail-thin with a narrow face, a weak chin, large, protruding brown eyes. He showed up to our interview at a local coffee shop with his black hair slicked back and wearing a slim-fitting black button-down, black slacks, and black oxfords. His affected comportment was delicate and proper – he sat with his legs crossed, elbows pulled in, and one hand resting on top of the other on the table. While he was not

wearing make-up at the interview, I have seen Jared at dance clubs around town with a powdered face and black eyeliner. Similar to Sean, Jared unabashedly described himself as "effeminate." I asked Jared if his gender presentation had changed over time or if he had always considered himself to be effeminate. He replied:

> Well it wasn't until about 8th grade that I started embracing more of that effeminate aesthetic. I started wearing make-up in 8th grade. Before then I was a lot more casual. I do believe that that came around the time when I started getting more into music and identifying myself with the message of certain genres, particularly the goth subculture and New Romantic. So at that age I started to embrace that more and through that I think that my style started to change. And I became more effeminate because I felt like I identified with that.

Here, Jared's explanation of his femininity is different than Sean's. Sean attributes qualities about him that are read as "more feminine than masculine" to his subconscious; whereas Jared connects his effeminacy to a conscious identification with goth subculture. At another point in the interview, I asked Jared, "What does it mean when you say you're effeminate? What is it that makes you effeminate?," to which he answered:

> My demeanor. Just pretty much my air. I do wear make-up from time to time. I really appreciate the New Romantic movement of the 80's. And I appreciate the

> Edwardian aesthetic of the early turn of the century and also that of the Victorian period. So you know all of these things I would consider to be effeminate because they're more romantic in nature. And also I think that most people would perceive me as effeminate because of these things so therefore I would have to classify myself as being effeminate through that as well.

In the first quote, Jared contrasts his effeminacy with an earlier period in his life when he was more "casual," which is how he describes most men. When asked to explain what he meant by "casual," he said, "Casual in that [most men] aren't naturally wanting to go an extra mile to accentuate certain aspects of themselves style-wise. They would rather just look more laidback. It's more a question of comfort rather than style for most men. And myself in relation to that I see myself as more stylized, more accentuated." In making this comparison, Jared draws on a popular discourse about gender that juxtaposes the "naturalness" of masculinity to the "artificiality" of femininity.

In the examples given above, both Sean and Jared discuss a range of self-attributes that they designate as feminine, particularly in comparison to men who have "swagger" or a "casual" appearance. This comparison, and the description of their femininity, point to somatic, behavioral, and aesthetic dimensions of gender. In contrast, Clint, a 50-year-old white man that I interviewed, would likely be described by Sean and Jared as having both "swagger" and a "casual" appearance. Clint arrived to our interview at a local coffee shop wearing a turquoise t-shirt with a pink peace sign printed on it,

baggy cargo shorts with a plaid pastel print, and flip-flops. Although the color scheme of the outfit could be coded as feminine, the fit of the clothing, along with Clint's body type and comportment – short and stocky with muscular arms, broad shoulders, and a wide stance – would be described as masculine. Clint's shaved head and piercing eyes give him an intensity that is only slightly off-set by his stylish, designer glasses. I noticed that his arms and legs are hairless (he later tells me that he saw the flyer for my study at the salon where he gets waxed) and this works to accentuate his muscular frame. While most men in my study gladly accepted my offer to buy them a drink, Clint, in a deep, commanding voice, told me that he would not allow a graduate student to buy him a drink, and he pulled his fat leather wallet out as he insisted on paying for our coffees. When I asked Clint to talk about his gender during the interview, he said, "I would say that I'm masculine – physically masculine, I guess is the key thing." He told me he was never harassed or bullied, unlike many of the men in my study, on account of his gender presentation. Yet, despite his masculine appearance, Clint told me:

> Yes, physically I'm a man. Emotionally, you know, [I'm] probably closer to a woman just from the standpoint of empathy and emotional connectedness and sensitivity – and these are kind of stereotypical things, but whatever. So very, kind of like a mixed bag. I mean some typical male things like I'm super active, super physical, kind of just driven. But then a lot of aspects of it, even in the way I approach work it's like you know very, a very empathetic way to do the kind of

> work that I do, which is hard because my job is to go into companies that are financially distressed and figure out how to fix them. So a lot of times it's like firing a lot of people or shutting down plants or you know just a lot of stuff that is kind of like you know dick moves of the corporate world.

It is difficult to believe that there is room for empathy and sensitivity in an occupation that involves restructuring companies and eliminating jobs, and Clint does acknowledge the contradiction between his description of his emotions and the requirements of his job. Whether or not it is true that Clint actually possesses the emotional attributes he describes is beside the point. What is worth noting is that even though he defines his physical appearance and some of his behavioral traits – being "active," "physical," and "driven" – as masculine, he also claims a connection to emotional traits that are stereotypically associated with women and femininity. While his description of himself as masculine was uncharacteristic of most of my other interviews, his portrayal of himself as sensitive and empathetic was similar to the way other men in my study talked about their emotions.

In addition to possessing "feminine" emotions, some of the men in my study also talked about having and pursuing interests that are coded as "feminine." Jared and Sean allude to this when they characterize their investment in a stylized aesthetic as something that makes them feminine. Along with his interest in fashion and grooming products, Sean also mentioned his love for musical theater and dancing as interests that are considered to be feminine. Like Sean, William, a 31-year-old Latino man who described

himself as "more feminine than a typical man," also talked about having feminine interests. For example, he told me about his disinterest in sports and his enjoyment of musicals and other elements of popular culture, like musical group The Spice Girls, that are not considered manly.

In contrast to Sean and Jared, I would not characterize William as having a particularly feminine or metrosexual aesthetic. For our interview, he wore an amalgamation of styles that seem mismatched to me: a grey flat cap, a pearl-snap Western shirt, tight fitting jeans, and running shoes. He is very short in stature and has a medium build with small paunch. His affect was flat but he seemed to warm up as the interview progressed. I noted that his face would shift from a flat, neutral countenance to exaggerated expressions that included dramatic eye rolls that were almost campy. His hand gesturing also seemed to increase throughout the course of the interview, which is something that occurred with other respondents as well. It is hard to say whether this was a result of increasing comfort or an example of mimicry (as I am prone to speak with my hands), or possibly both.

During our interview on the patio of a local coffee shop, I was fortunate enough to observe an interaction that William interpreted as a "mistaken for gay" incident. In contrast to the rock music that usually plays over the speakers at this coffee shop, one of the employees was playing a mixture of songs from Disney movies at a high volume. The strangeness of this musical selection was striking not only to William and me, but also to the man and woman sitting at the table next to us. After recognizing that we were

sharing a laugh about the music, the woman, who was white, in her early thirties, and conventionally feminine, turned to us and said, "What happened to the play list? They're playing a song from *The Little Mermaid*. What's going to be next, *The Lion King*?" I replied, "They just played that. I don't know what's next." William chimed in, "They missed *Aladdin*. If they're going backwards, they went from *Lion King*, they skipped *Aladdin*, they skipped *Beauty and the Beast*." The woman, now laughing, interrupted: "You know the order! I'm surprised." I also began laughing as William and I shared a knowing glance. William replied to the woman, "Thank you for proving our point." After he turned back to me, I laughed and said, "That was pretty perfect, actually." To which William responded, "I'm pretty sure she thinks I'm gay." As I discuss later in this chapter, the men in my study who described themselves as "feminine" or "effeminate," make a connection between their gender presentation and being read as gay. The encounter at the coffee shop illustrates this interpretation. The woman did not actually say anything about William's sexuality, but her surprise about his knowledge of Disney films suggested to William that his sexual identity had been misread. Although he laughed about this encounter, at other points in the interview I detected his anxieties, which I will discuss in a later chapter, about being read as gay.

In sum, the men in my study described a range of practices, traits, and interests to illustrate their "femininity" or "effeminacy." For Sean and Jared, along with other men in my study, having a stylized aesthetic and engaging in particular grooming practices – going to salons, using hair products, using moisturizers, wearing make-up – to achieve

this aesthetic are labeled as "feminine." The conscious cultivation of an aesthetic is contrasted with the "casualness" or lack of concern and effort that "typical," read "masculine," men put into their appearance. This is also what the label "metrosexual" is intended to describe: straight men's engagement in aesthetic and consumption practices typically associated with women and urban gay men. Yet, as my interviews show, metrosexuality does not exhaust the dimensions of male femininity. In addition to aesthetics, several men told me that their emotions – being empathetic, sensitive, emotionally expressive, and seeking emotional connection with others – made them "feminine." Additionally, many men described their comportment as feminine. In particular, the use of expressive hand gestures while communicating was mentioned in several interviews as an example of a feminine trait. Finally, some of the men categorized their tastes, like having an interest in dancing or musical theater, as "feminine." Some men in my study, like Sean, who called himself a "feminine person…for a lot of reasons," identified with all of these attributes. Others, like Clint, who characterized himself as "physically masculine" and a "mixed bag" in terms of gender, only identified with some aspects of being a feminine man. While Sean self-identified as a feminine man, Clint's account of his gender could be more accurately described as a hybrid masculinity (Bridges and Pascoe 2014).

Earlier in the chapter, I defined male femininity as men's engagement in practices and/or embodiment of characteristics that are culturally ascribed to women, and are therefore coded as "feminine." In this definition, femininity is conceptualized as a

socially constructed category that varies across time and space. In other words, there is no essential, true, or timeless form of femininity, and there is nothing inherently feminine about the practices, emotions, or tastes described above. Likewise, there is no essential, true, or timeless form of masculinity. Masculinity and femininity are inherently relational constructs, which is why the men in my study described themselves as "feminine" in contrast to conventionally masculine men. That being said, it is noteworthy that many of the straight-identified individuals in my study do describe themselves as feminine men. In these accounts they point to their engagement in practices and possession of traits that have been reified and stereotyped as "feminine" in American culture. I am not arguing that these men are truly feminine, because I do not think there is such a thing. I am also not arguing that they are always, or possibly ever, read as effeminate. What is important for this study is that they categorize themselves as feminine, and claim to be read by others as such.

The Intersections of Class, Race, and Male Femininity

Not only are masculinity and femininity constructed in relation to one another, the meaning and contents of these categories are context-specific. This means that a man who is viewed as feminine in one social setting could be considered masculine in another. Sebastian, a 24-year-old white man who works as a barista, shared stories that highlight the contextual aspects of gender categories in relation to social class (Bettie, 2003;

Skeggs 2004). I interviewed Sebastian, who was referred to the study through a friend of a fellow graduate student, at the downtown Austin coffee shop where he works. Short and fit, he was dressed in slim-fitting khaki pants, a stylish plaid button-down with short sleeves that tightly hugged his muscular arms, and casual oxfords. He has short, slightly wavy brown hair that is neatly styled. His strong square jawline gives his facial structure a masculine quality that is slightly feminized by his large, brown eyes. In contrast to some of the men in my study, I was not surprised that Sebastian is read as gay. In my field notes I characterize his overall aesthetic as an "urban, upper-middle class, 'gay' style (not hipster)" due to the neatness of his preppy appearance. His style could easily be categorized as "metrosexual."

Although I read him as upper-middle class based on his clothing, Sebastian told me that he grew up in a poor neighborhood in Fort Worth, TX. When I asked him to talk about that experience he said:

> Um, well I think, and maybe this is interesting for your study because I grew up in Section 8 housing, you know like project housing. And so as with any poverty anywhere in the world it is highly masculinized. So my experience was more, I had to be tough from really young. My experience was pretty much like street football and wrestling and fighting, like backyard boxing, and stuff like that you know? A lot of athletic activities.

I asked, "When you say you had to be tough, what does that mean? Can you think of examples?" He replied,

> Yeah, well I mean, from a very young age like we were all in the street a lot, like we were all in our neighborhoods quite a bit, unlike the suburbs where people kind of stay indoors and don't know their neighbors that well, we were all outside. We like, we would always end up fighting each other, you know? Like on the block so-and-so would say something and then like say he said something about your mom or something, the rule, the cultural logic was such that you had to beat him up or you were like a bitch, you know? Or like someone would challenge you and you would have to stand up, like I had a younger brother too and so I defended him quite a bit.

Here, Sebastian talks about how his social environment necessitated an engagement in physical violence in order to avoid being feminized as a "bitch." Sebastian contrasts the "masculine" environment of his poor, urban neighborhood – where kids engaged in rough-and-tumble physical activities in the street – with middle-class suburbs where kids are sheltered indoors.

While Sebastian grew up in a "masculine" environment that required him to be tough, he said that in high school he began to see himself as "feminine," particularly in

relation to his peers. Sebastian contrasted his emotional sensitivity and romantic notions about love to friends who bragged about their sexual "conquests" with girls:

> So I had this very rosy like you know all is beautiful, I'm gonna find that one and every girl I found was the one (in my head, I wouldn't say it of course because that would ruin it). But in my head I was like okay now I'm here, I've arrived. And then you know we'd break up and I'd you know I'd cry and like feel terrible. And looking around me to my friends, at least not visibly none of them had that experience, you know? And um I talked about it in my head a few ways like, 'Oh, you're just emotionally more mature,' or whatever. At other times I was like, 'Well you're very feminine right now, like that's what your dad would say, or your brother would say,' you know?

In this story, Sebastian characterizes himself as sensitive and emotionally expressive. He said that he sought emotional vulnerability in romantic relationships as opposed to pursuing sexual conquests. This, along with his emotional response to break-ups, is interpreted as a sign of "femininity." At other parts in the interview, he describes his empathy, gentleness, carefulness, and consideration for other people as examples of his feminine traits.

This sense of himself as "feminine," was upended when he began attending a private liberal arts college on a full-ride scholarship. Sebastian, who said that there were

"maybe thirteen other poor kids there from what my count was," described the largely upper-middle class student body as "people that had gone to private institutions, had been to private schools their whole lives, probably never worked, or maybe they did have a summer job or somethin', like their parents were matching their income or whatever, like their parents were matching their pay like two-to-one so they can go on a trip." In this upper-middle class environment, Sebastian described a shift in how he experienced his gender: "I think I was bit more racy and I was aggressive to them, which is *crazy* because where I'm from I'm very feminine. To them I was extremely aggressive, competitive and things like that." When I asked him to elaborate on this he said:

> When I moved in I was 21, they put me in these / I'd been all over the world by this time and I'd seen a whole bunch of stuff – I'd been in jail several times, been in pool halls everywhere, haunted libraries in Paris, like I've seen a lot of shit, and um so we, we get there and in my dorm there's no drinking or female visitors. And they told me that and I was like, "Pshh, I'll show you how much that works for you." And so I would just drink a 40 on the stoop outside of my place and the RA, who was younger than me was like, "Hey, you can't do that." And I was like, "Well, I don't know what to tell you because I'm doing it right now. What do you mean I can't do it?" (laughs) And so these kinds of refusals that I would make all the time or institutional refusals, people would be like, "We can't be late to class!" and I was like, "We'll be there when we get there," you know? Those

> kind of things that felt masculine. Um, also I think I'm naturally a little athletic and they were more prone to this kind of hipstery, I don't know, like they're just / they were like frail [said with some disgust]. They never / their parents didn't allow them to play football or stuff like that. They had all that care in their childhoods that my parents were just like, "Yeah, go play in the woods" or whatever. And they didn't have those similar experiences, so I was more prone to climb stuff or break stuff.

In this quote, Sebastian recounts interactions that contradict his description of himself as gentle and considerate of others. However, these events occurred during his undergraduate career, and he told me he has matured since then. Furthermore, he understands his "aggressiveness" during this time as at least partially a reaction to being an outsider on account of his class background.

Contradictions aside, this story is interesting because it reveals the ways that gendered experiences are interwoven with classed experiences. Sebastian's account of his gendered self is refracted through his class position. The intersection of gender and class became apparent to Sebastian as he moved from a working class urban environment to a predominately upper-middle class liberal arts college in a small Texas town. His experience highlights the contextual aspect of gender categories: he viewed himself as "very feminine" in the housing projects where he grew up and was therefore surprised that he felt, and was perceived as, masculine in an upper-middle class context. The above

quote also demonstrates how gender categories are mapped onto class categories. Sebastian characterizes working class environments as "masculine" and believes he is perceived as "racy," "aggressive," and "competitive" by his middle class peers. In contrast to these masculine descriptors, Sebastian feminizes the upper-middle class men at his college by describing them as "frail," which he believes stems from their sheltered childhoods.

Although Sebastian does not explicitly talk about race, the student body at the college he attended is also predominately and disproportionately white. Since Sebastian is also white, the locus of difference in his story about gender revolves around the category of class, while race goes unmentioned. Yet the meanings of gendered practices intersect with race as well as class. For example, Pascoe (2007) found that at the California high school she studied only white boys were called "fags" for dancing. In other words, the cultural coding of dancing as a "feminine" activity is racialized. So when Sean, who is white, gives his interest in dancing as an example of his femininity, he does so from an unstated position of whiteness.

None of the white men in my study explicitly talked about having a racial identity. This is unsurprising given that whiteness is the dominant racial category and is therefore unmarked. In contrast, William, the Latino man who thought he was mistaken for gay during our interview, discussed his gendered experiences in relationship to his racial identity. William was born in Honduras and lived there until he was eight-years-old. He moved after his mother married an American stationed at a US Air Force base in

Honduras. After spending time at an Air Force base in the Azores, where he learned English, and briefly living in several US states, his family ended up in Fort Worth, TX when he was 12. He spent the rest of his teenage years in Fort Worth, attended college in Denton, TX, and eventually moved to Austin, where he has lived for two years. When I asked William to describe his gender and how he would compare himself to the "typical man," he replied:

> Um, boy that's a hard question. I may be more feminine than a typical man. I use my hands a lot. I think that's part of being Hispanic. I don't think that has anything to do with gender. Um Hispanic people just use their hands a lot to talk and show emotion and stuff. And I kind of have a higher pitched voice than most men and I'm like girl-sized height-wise. So I would think, I think I'm pretty normal but maybe compared to like a macho man at a 10 and a woman at 1, I'm like a 6?

In some aspects, this description of male femininity is similar to responses from other men in my study. William points to somatic attributes – a higher pitched voice and short stature – that mark him as more feminine than the "typical man." Yet his response makes explicit what goes unsaid in other interviews: the "typical man" and conventional masculinity, which most men used as reference points when describing their own gender, are not racially neutral categories but in fact refer to whiteness. As I previously noted,

the use of expressive hand gestures when communicating was frequently cited in my interviews as an example of effeminacy. Although William also discusses this aspect of his comportment, he immediately connects it to being Hispanic, while attempting to downplay its gendered significance.

Despite his assertion that this trait has nothing to do with gender, the flow of William's response points to the ways Latinos are feminized in American culture. Gesticulating to convey emotions, and even expressing emotions, are behaviors that other men in my study characterized as feminine. Paradoxically, Latinos are also caricatured as subscribing to a culture of machismo that involves aggressive objectification of women (Gutmann 2006). William distances himself from this stereotype, which he also accepts as true, later in the interview when the conversation returns to the topic of his effeminacy:

> W: I don't think I hold myself like a macho person.
>
> T: Chest out? Taking a lot of space?
>
> W: Yeah. I think I hold myself in a more dainty fashion. I don't, I don't like, in Hispanic culture um, like if you're standing there with your buddies and a woman passes by like you know you'll whistle at her and you know do all this stuff. And I don't know, that's just not um, that's just not how I grew up. Um um yeah and I do use my hands a lot but I think that's part of being Hispanic as well.

Since gesticulation came up again, I asked William if he was more conscious of talking with his hands in predominately white spaces. He responded, "I think I still do [gesture with my hands]. But yeah when I'm hanging out around like a Hispanic crowd um I think I use my hands less." When I asked why, he said:

> W: I don't know, I think when I was younger I was definitely ashamed of being Hispanic. And um I was very pro you know "I'm American now," you know, "I act a certain way." And you know when I'm hanging out with my friends and I'm doing something uh, like you know talking like this [gestures with his hands] it's a quirk. When I'm hanging out with a big group of [Hispanic] people, I'm part of them and everyone can tell now.
>
> T: So you think it was partially, or your sense or how you understand it now, was about trying to distance yourself from that culture and being associated with that ethnic group before?
>
> W: Yeah.

At another point in the interview when talking about his high school experience, William said, "I'm fair skinned. I have an accent but it's not terribly deep. Um so people just always assumed I was a white guy and I kind of liked it that people assumed that."

William is not the only man who is self-consciousness about his effeminate traits, nor is he only man who acknowledged trying to restrain them in certain situations. For example, Sebastian said the following about how he signals he is straight:

> I think it's largely emotional and about posture…it's more of a I'll stop gesticulating. For some reason just gesticulation is big. I think when I start moving my hands a lot and touching my face, I think people are more prone to think I'm gay. So whenever I'm trying to act straight I drop my hands, you know and I keep my shoulders back and I become less involved with someone's eyes, so instead of talking with you like this [looks straight into my eyes], I'm more prone to shoot off over here [looks around, doesn't hold eye contact] or look disinterested, you know?

For Sebastian, this toning down of his feminine comportment occurs when he wants to signal disinterest to gay men who hit on him or when he is talking to a "manly man." In this description, Sebastian equates "trying to act straight" with masculine comportment. Sean also discussed his engagement in gender code-switching in particular situations:

> I'll lower my voice around certain people. I'll use certain words. I like all words, pretty much. There are some words that are weirdly gendered though. Like if you say "pretty" – like I said "pretty" earlier – and I caught myself with my hand,

> I was like aw that's a very gendered word. But it's also just a *word*. [laughs]. That's how I feel, but but you're not allowed to say that as a guy. You're supposed to say "nice looking." I've always been impressed by how easily I can switch gears into like masculine-hood if I need to present that way. And I just find myself, like it's a whole different vernacular, it's a whole different way of like standing and it's seamless.

Sean and Sebastian discuss doing gender in conventionally masculine ways in interactions with gay men who might be interested in them or with men that they read as being masculine. Their responses highlight the relationship between gender presentation and sexual identity work in a cultural context where gender and sexuality are conflated. For Sean and Sebastian, though, this monitoring of gender presentation does not carry the racial significance that it does for William. While William said that in his early twenties he began to feel proud of being from Honduras, his account of earlier periods in his life reveals shame about his racialized ethnicity and immigrant status. The shame of being Latino and his desire to be seen as a white American both color his reflections on his gendered experience and the meanings he attaches to his comportment. As William tells it, he was more concerned that hand gesturing was a signifier of non-whiteness than a marker of gayness or effeminacy. Furthermore, Sebastian and Sean, as men with racial privilege, can more easily approximate hegemonic masculinity when necessary. As Sean says, this movement into "masculine-hood" is easily achieved and "seamless." As a man

of color, William does not have the luxury of seamlessly moving into a category that is not only gendered, but also racialized (Connell 1995).

Negotiating the Conflation of Gender and Sexuality

For the most part, the men in my study claimed a special moral esteem for themselves on account of their "feminine" qualities. Although Sebastian disparaged his college classmates' "frailty" and acknowledged that he acts more masculine in certain encounters, at other points in the interview he described femininity as ethically superior to conventional masculinity. Far from being ashamed of their effeminacy, it was not uncommon to hear men in my study invert the masculine/feminine status hierarchy. For example, Jared proclaimed, "I'm effeminate. I recognize that. I embrace that. I wish more men were in order to counteract the principles that I feel like keep men down and keep them from showing their emotions." In Jared's interpretation, masculinity is conceived of as constrictive and harmful to men's well-being, particularly because he believes masculine norms require an unhealthy repression of emotions.

Although men like Jared profess to embrace femininity, they also recognize the ways that gender nonconformity complicates their claims to a heterosexual identity. Jared was the first man that I interviewed for this project. We met almost ten years ago through a mutual friend in the Austin music scene. Since then we have not spent time together one-on-one, but I occasionally encounter him at music venues in Austin. During

the time that I was writing my dissertation proposal, Jared posted the following "status" on Facebook: "For the last time, world, I'm not gay!" I immediately asked if I could interview him for my project and he said he would be happy to participate. During our interview, I asked whether anything in particular had sparked his exasperated declaration on Facebook. He responded:

> J: Well I have another friend who is also effeminate and we were activity partners – we like to go out and dance, we like going to the same places. We were both always very well-dressed – very formal: ties, dress shoes, slacks. And I think there is a misperception that if a man always looks too good or is always dressing up that they must be gay. And so when we would go out together, even though we were both straight, we were often misperceived as being gay and with one another, because we were always out with one another.
>
> T: And how did you know in those situations? Was it people asking or…
>
> J: It was a way in which I read through social cues, through others and they looked at me and the way I wouldn't get as much reception from women when I was hanging out with him. It was also the way in which they came up to us and they just assumed that we were gay. Like, "Oh, you guys are so cute together." Or, you know, "Are you guys gay?" They would just ask us and we would both get frustrated in just constantly being misinterpreted. But yet at the same time we

> understood how we would [be misinterpreted] considering the way we knew we were.

Although Jared described other instances where he faced physical violence and verbal harassment for being read as gay, in this story he encountered women who intended to compliment him and his friend by telling them they looked "cute" together. He is frustrated because he thinks he receives less romantic interest from women when out with this friend on account of being "misperceived" as a gay couple. He rejects the "misperception" that effeminacy always signifies same-sex desire, yet also recognizes that his gender presentation, particularly when coupled with his friend's effeminacy, leads to being "misinterpreted" as gay.

When asked to explain why they thought people read them as gay, like Jared, several respondents pointed to their "feminine" traits and practices. Parker, a 47 year-old white man, sent the following email in response to my flyer, which asked "Are you ever mistaken for gay?:"

> I spent a year of college in east Arkansas (not my choice). Somebody wrote "FAG" on my door.
>
> I don't care about football, or most any team sport. I like to cook and tend to dress well, don't mind dressing up for fancy dinners out.

> but I'm attracted to women, not men. My wife was amused when a guy recently asked me "are you gay?", not realizing I was with my wife and mother of our three kids.
>
> oh yeah, that happens to me…it doesn't bother me. I just quit caring so much what other people think. if somebody doesn't like me, I figure they have something wrong with them. I'm not trying to fit in.
>
> yes, I have like 60 pairs of shoes…. but that doesn't make me gay, just well heeled. [Punctuation in the original email]

In a subsequent email, Parker suggested meeting at his home for an interview. While tempted to check out his shoe collection, I requested meeting at a public location due to my concerns about my safety. We ended up meeting at a shopping center in West Lake Hills, a wealthy, and politically conservative, suburb of Austin where Parker lives with his wife and their three children. He arrived to the interview in a new white BMW sedan. Of average height and medium build, he was sharply dressed in a vintage-cut black Penguin polo, slim-fitting black pants, and shiny black patent leather tennis shoes. His dark brown hair was cut in a classic taper that completed his yuppie aesthetic. During the interview his bangs occasionally fell down over the sides of his face and he would slick them back into place with his hand. Based on his style, expressive facial expressions, gesticulation, and higher pitched voice, I can understand why people sometimes express surprise when they find out Parker is straight.

During the interview I discover that Parker is a stay-at-home dad who handles domestic duties and childcare while his wife works as a corporate lawyer. This is, of course, not irrelevant to his gendered experience. In our interview he discussed an inability to connect with other men in social situations due to conversations that revolve around work and sports. Consequently, at mixed gender get-togethers he prefers to hang out with the women in the kitchen and talk about shoes and clothes. While he claims to be comfortable and secure in his position as a homemaker, I detected some anxiety and defensiveness in response to my questions about this role. For example, when discussing his cooking duties, he pointed out that most chefs in restaurants are men and therefore it should be acceptable that he also prepares meals. I interpreted this as an attempt to recuperate the gendered status of an activity that is often coded as "feminine," especially when it is unpaid labor.

I quote Parker's initial email because it nicely and succinctly highlights several themes that emerged in my research. First, the men in my study talked about a range of "mistaken for gay" experiences, from the violent and threatening to the fairly benign and amusing. Of course, the same kinds of incidents were interpreted differently by respondents: some men shrugged off being called "fags," as I discuss in the next chapter, while some women were not amused by questions pertaining to their partner's sexual identity.

Second, most, but not all, of the men in my study connected being read as gay to being perceived as effeminate. Similar to Jared, Parker recognizes that his engagement in

activities coded as "feminine," i.e. enjoyment of cooking, dressing well, obsessing about shoes, and his eschewing of "masculine" activities, i.e. showing interest in team sports, are read as signs of same-sex desire. Bridges' (2014) concept of "sexual aesthetics," which points to the symbolic aspects of sexual identities, is useful for making sense of Parker's email. Bridges (2014:62) defines "sexual aesthetics" as "cultural and stylistic distinctions utilized to delineate symbolic boundaries between gay and straight cultures and individuals." Interestingly, Bridges found that straight men he interviewed who engaged in the types of practices listed by Parker described these aspects of themselves as "gay." He argues that this essentializing discourse works to strengthen symbolic boundaries between gay and straight men. Parker does understand that these practices and interests are stereotyped as gay, hence the listing of the activities immediately followed by the phrase "but I'm attracted to women, not men." Unlike the men in Bridges' study, however, he rejects the idea that these activities are inherently or essentially "gay:" "yes, I have like 60 pairs of shoes…. but that doesn't make me gay, just well heeled." For Parker, and other men in my study, rejecting cultural discourses that equate these aesthetic practices and interests with being "gay" functions as a means of claiming a straight identity. Instead of identifying these interests, traits, and practices as "gay," some of the men in my study, like Parker and Jared, opt to identify as "feminine" straight men, even as they recognize that this identity category is not typically validated in American culture.

Third, Parker and other men in my study attempt to authenticate and signal their heterosexuality through references to female partners or desires for women. In his email, for instance, Parker makes sure to draw attention to his "wife" and to the fact that he has three children. Not only does he signal his heterosexuality through this statement, he also locates himself within a normative nuclear family structure. In Jared's case, he explains part of his frustration with being read as gay as relating to decreased romantic and sexual attention he receives from women who "misperceive" his sexuality. While this may be an honest expression of his feelings and perceptions, it also functions as a performance of heterosexuality. I will return to this theme in greater detail in Chapter 6.

I'm not gay…not that there's anything with that

Negotiating the conflation of effeminacy and same-sex desire is a tricky task for the straight-identified men in my study. Their sexual identity work involves walking a fine line that requires conveying their heterosexuality to others while not coming off as defensive about it. Here is how Sean describes the conundrum of communicating his heterosexuality to people:

> I didn't want to tell people I was straight because the mentality that I was taught when I was a kid, and it is still reinforced all the time, is that if you are defensive about your sexuality then you are gay. Right? Which is screwed up. It's just, I

> mean there's research which shows that more homophobic people *might be gay*. Um but to defend your sexuality, or just to describe your sexuality…but in any case even just saying you have a sexuality means you are gay, right?

In this quote, Sean points to the widely held belief that defensiveness about one's heterosexuality reveals repressed same-sex desires. Proclamations of straightness – either explicitly stated or implicitly communicated, by for example talking excessively about sexual interest in women – are often interpreted as overcompensation for insecurities about one's sexual identity. For this reason, declarations like Jared's – "For the last time, world, I am not gay!" – run the risk of being seen as protesting too much. Likewise, being homophobic is also considered to be a sign of closetedness. As Sean makes reference to, this belief is legitimated through scientific studies reported on in the popular press in articles with titles like this one in the *New York Times*: "Homophobic? Maybe You're Gay" (Ryan and Ryan 2012).

Sean also points to the normative status of straightness when he says, "just saying you have a sexuality means you are gay." As with other dominant identity categories, the dominance of heterosexuality means that it usually goes unmarked. One aspect of a heteronormative culture is that most people are simply assumed to be heterosexual. Yet, this assumption of straightness does not always extend to straight-identified men like Sean who see themselves, and claim to be perceived by others, as feminine. Sean refers to having your straight identity read correctly by others as a "bro privilege:"

> I wrote this article that was like "30 bro privileges," or like masculine dude privileges, and it was mostly a snarky thing but it was like privileges I don't have as being a feminine dude, even though I still have male privilege and straight privilege, or heterosexual privilege, I don't really have like "bro privilege". And it was mostly snarky but it was really weird because a lot of people wrote me emails about that and they were like, "That was so good because I feel like I identify with that even though it was tongue-in-cheek." Um but I realize that is, like they're more hiccups and they're frustrations than they are actual obstructions to being truly happy. Whereas with people who are of a gender and sexual minority, they have genuine roadblocks in the way of being happy whereas me it's like yeah that girl thought I was gay, that sucked.

Sean went on to list a few of items in his article: "A bro privilege would be not having to come out as straight, not having to convince someone you were dating that you were dating, not having to defend the way that you dress, not having to defend the products that you buy for your face – things like that." As someone who speaks and writes about privilege, Sean is careful to distinguish between the "frustrations" of being mistaken for gay or having to account for aesthetic practices and "genuine roadblocks" faced by gay and lesbian people. He also acknowledges that he has straight privilege and male privilege, but contends that these privileges are mediated by his feminine gender

presentation. As a feminine dude, Sean has to "come out as straight" while not appearing defensive about this heterosexuality.

As Sean notes, pronouncements of one's straightness are complicated in that the very act of asserting straightness simultaneously calls that identity into question. As I mentioned earlier, and will discuss further on in Chapter 6, some of the men in my study perform heterosexual identities by referencing female partners or expressing attraction, both verbal and non-verbal, to women. Another way that men make claims to a straight identity, and are recognized as straight by others, while engaging in practices coded as "gay" or "feminine" is through the category of the "metrosexual." To my surprise, however, the term "metrosexual" only came up in a few interviews. I did not explicitly ask about metrosexuality because I was curious about whether my respondents would discuss this on their own volition. I suspect part of the reason that discussions of metrosexuality were largely absent from my interviews is because the usage of this term has waned in recent years as it has been eclipsed by the use of "hipster" to describe young, urban, white middle-class men's aesthetic practices. Furthermore, Dean (2014) found that men in his study who were labeled as metrosexuals by others did not self-identify as such. Like the use of the adjective, "hipster," "metrosexual" is often used as a pejorative.

The label "metrosexual" functions largely as an attributed identity, and often serves as a euphemism for homophobic epithets (Dean 2014; Hennen 2008). Yet, as I discussed in my literature review, in popular discourse the category "metrosexual" also

carves out space for heterosexual men to engage in aesthetic practices associated with women and gay men, while still retaining their straight status. Darren, a 28 year-old white man who recently moved to Austin from Cincinnati, OH was one of the men who reported being labeled as metrosexual in the past. Darren was average height but rail-thin, with a gaunt face and piercing blue eyes. He had a neatly trimmed beard and his brown hair was slightly mussed. I imagine he would be more likely to be labeled a "hipster" or a "slacker" than a "metrosexual" based on the combination of his facial hair and outfit, which consisted of a slim-fitting plain blue poly/cotton blend t-shirt, skinny brown corduroy pants, and Adidas soccer shoes. While he came across as awkward initially, he warmed up as the interview progressed and I found him to be very bright, articulate and reflective in his answers to my questions. When I asked Darren how he would describe his gender and gender presentation, he replied,

> D: I think I feel very, I feel that I'm pretty comfortable with my sexuality. I feel that I do um [pause] exhibit more feminine, like typically feminine characteristics than like the average male. I think a lot of men, especially in the south, are more concerned with kind of keeping up this kind of like strong image of the strong male. And I, yeah I've always been, like my frame has always been a little bit more slender. And I've always you know been kind of comfortable, like I used to you know at one point I was called like "metro" or whatever.
>
> T: Like that was how other people made sense of you? As a metrosexual?

> Yeah. And I embraced that. I was happy with that, you know that didn't bother me. And really like over time I mean I would say like from college on, and maybe even high school, it didn't bother me that people would assume I was gay. In fact I kind of enjoyed it in a way.

Darren's response to my question about his gender is interesting in that he begins by stating that he feels "comfortable with his sexuality." This preface to his description of his gender is telling of his need – as a man who claims to be read as gay because of his feminine qualities – to assert being secure in his straightness. Darren also says that he felt comfortable with being called a metrosexual. While it could be interpreted that his embracing of this label was a way to shore up his straight identity, he also says that not only does he not mind being read as gay, he even enjoys it. This rhetoric makes sense given that being okay with being read as gay serves as proof of being secure with one's straightness. Darren, in other words, doth not protest too much.

In my interview with Sean, he asked whether other men in my study had talked about metrosexuality, which directed our conversation to the topic. Sean, like Darren, also discussed being labeled as a "metrosexual:"

> I was labeled that externally the first time. It was actually the guy who stood up in my comedy show [here Sean refers to an earlier "mistaken for gay" story] and was like, "Are you gay?," like that guy. Another gal stood up on the other side

> and yelled, "It's pronounced 'metrosexual'." It was awesome! And then they got into a little fight. Yeah, so that was the first time I'd ever heard that term. But yeah, for me it was never something that I've identified myself with, but it was just something a saw as a helpful label...I can't think of a time when someone was like, "Are you gay?" and I'm like, "No, I'm metrosexual." Like I've never said that.

Perhaps Sean has never declared himself as metrosexual directly in response to being questioned about his sexuality, but at another point in the interview he does admit to identifying with the label and using it to describe himself: "For a long time I've identified with that label because until that word came around, or at least came into my purview, I was 'not gay.' And then I finally have like something that wasn't 'not gay' to describe myself – and being something is better than being a lack of something, right?" For Sean, the category of "metrosexual" proved useful for making sense of his gender and sexuality while allowing him to stop defining himself through a direct disavowal of gayness. However, he does find the label "problematic" in that it involves assuming that "all gay men are fashionable or care about their appearance."

Sean claims to no longer identify as metrosexual other than in an ironic way: "It's more tongue-in-cheek ironic. Um I just say I'm a feminine guy – that's what I say now. I'm comfortable saying that. People are like, 'What does that mean?' And I explain it." Like Jared and Parker, Sean's identity as a feminine straight man relies on

disarticulating gender from sexuality. For Sean, his gender identification, being a "feminine guy," does not determine his sexual orientation, being straight. Sean hopes that he can serve as a role model for other feminine straight men by being public – through his comedy shows, books, and web presence – about his experiences with gender and sexuality. He said he receives emails from men who have anxieties about being read as gay and who "take comfort in knowing that like I am a straight guy who is comfortable talking about these things. And is a straight guy who is misread as gay and isn't terrified of that." He continued:

> And I see myself like, 8 years ago when this all started or whatever, or longer than that I guess – 10 years ago – I see myself then, like I didn't have anybody publicly like me, who I could even like relate to other than like celebrities who everybody just always was like, "That guy's gay." I mean we don't know – they're abstract people, right? So I think that there is some benefit to supporting people in exploring – I think – in supporting people in exploring their gender and sexuality regardless of their identity, is a healthy thing to do, um but I also think, yeah, there is an under-served population in this group.

Here Sean notes an absence of cultural representations of feminine straight men that he could identify with when he was struggling to understand why he was "misread as gay." While recognizing that some celebrities faced speculation about their sexuality, he did

not see them as real people. Sean's characterizes his attempts to educate people about the distinction between gender and sexuality as a form of activism. He hopes to expand the gendered possibilities for straight men, while encouraging them to reflect on their gender and sexuality, by publicly identifying as a straight man that is also feminine. Returning to the points Sean made earlier in this subsection, he knows that focusing his comedy and writing on being "mistaken as gay" can be interpreted as a sign of insecurity about his sexuality or even homophobia: "In a lot of ways it can be taken as, 'Well, why are you so defensive?' or 'What's wrong with being gay?' Like, *nothing* is wrong with being gay, I'm just not that, you know?"

Conclusion

The sentiment expressed by Sean above is typical of men in my study: they stressed that their claims to a straight identity were not meant to indicate a disapproval of being gay. Moreover, several men reported amusement, indifference, or even enjoyment about being perceived as gay. For the men in my study, the avowal of a straight identity in response to being read as gay is characterized not as defensive, but as simply being a factually true statement. As Sean says, "I'm just not that," by which he means he is not actually a gay man, despite being read as such. The men in my study told me that even though they might have questioned their sexual identity at earlier points in their lives, this was something they had worked through. As I discussed earlier, these men have the

complicated task of communicating a straight identity to people who read them as gay, while not appearing defensive or insecure. For this reason, their claims to be unperturbed by "mistaken for gay" incidents, and their disavowal of homophobia, can be interpreted as facets of their straight identity work.

As I discussed earlier, the men in my study believe they are read as gay due to their engagement in practices coded as feminine. Several of the men in my study self-identify as "feminine" or "effeminate" men on account of their practices, interests, comportment, and emotional traits. Yet, I also highlight how the meanings of these "feminine" gender practices are contextualized by men's class positions and racial identities. While masculinities scholars like Anderson (2009) and McCormack (2012) argue that boys and men can now engage in practices coded as "gay" or "feminine" without this threatening their heterosexual identity, this was not the case for the men I interviewed. As I demonstrate in this chapter, straight men who are perceived as effeminate continue to contend with the "gender inversion model of homosexuality," which holds that gay people usually possess characteristics associated with the "opposite" sex. In this context, these men have to disarticulate gender expression from sexual orientation. In other words, they argue that their "feminine" traits to do not determine or signal their sexual identity.

Unlike Marcus Bachmann, who desires living in a world where gay people do not exist, these men discuss being accepting of gay people, supporting gay rights, and having gay friends. Undoubtedly, the men in my study have benefited from the increasing

visibility and acceptance of gay people. In fact, these straight-identified men are valorized in some contexts for their engagement in practices that have been coded as "feminine" and "gay." Darren illustrates this when he exclaims, "It didn't bother me that people would assume I was gay. In fact I kind of enjoyed it in a way." Like the men in Bridges' (2014) study, they also describe themselves as feminine in order to distance themselves from aspects of masculinity that have become increasingly stigmatized. These men present themselves as more enlightened, evolved, and progressive than the conventionally masculine man.

That being said, changes in the social status of gay and lesbian people are uneven. Despite signs of decreasing social acceptance of homophobia, gay and lesbian people still face harassment, discrimination, and violence on account of their sexual identity. While straight-identified men who are read as gay may be valorized and rewarded in particular contexts, they are also at risk of being targets of homophobia on account of this perception. In the next chapter, I discuss how straight-identified make sense of their experiences of homophobia on account of being perceived as gay.

Chapter Five: Talk like a Man. Walk like a Man, My Son: Straight-identified Individuals' Experiences of Homophobia

When I asked Martin, a 33 year old, straight-identified white man, if he had ever experienced homophobia on account of being read as gay, he immediately replied, "Definitely." Martin has a taut build, he cannot be more than 5'6" tall, and while his muscles are well defined from playing drums, he is thin and non-threatening in appearance. He has wavy reddish-brown hair, a ruddy, freckled face, large brown eyes, and an unkempt beard. Aesthetically, he comes across as a parody of an English professor, which he aspires to be, minus the tweed jacket with elbow patches. His typical attire, which looks more thrift store than upscale department store, consists of a navy cardigan sweater worn over a blue or gray button-down, black, slim-fitting polyester slacks, and black oxfords. In response to my probing about experiences with homophobia, Martin told me a story about a recent trip to eastern Massachusetts to visit his parents. While he was waiting in line at a Dunkin Donuts, two men, described by Martin as "construction workers," immediately behind him began coughing the word "faggot" under their breath. Martin, shaken by the encounter, returned to the table where his mother was sitting and recounted the story to her. Initially his mother refused to believe this had occurred. After Martin insisted that he had not imagined being the target of the homophobic slurs, his mother responded by saying, "Well, what do you expect when you are dressed like that? You are not in Austin."

While there is evidence of decreasing social acceptance for explicit expressions of homophobia, surveys show that significant numbers of LGBT individuals have experienced discrimination and exclusion because of their sexual orientation or gender identity (Burns and Krehely 2011; Brown 2013). Surveys, public discourse, and social science research about homophobia tends to focus exclusively on the experiences of individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. Yet some gender scholars (Burn, 2000; Connell 2005, Pascoe 2007, Kimmel 2008) point to the ways that homophobia is directed not only at LGBT people, but is also directed at straight-identified individuals as a means of policing gender. This important theoretical and empirical work highlights the role homophobia plays in reproducing heterosexuality and gender norms, but does not explain how straight people interpret being on the receiving end of homophobic violence.

In this chapter, I draw on life history interviews with straight-identified people who claim to be perceived as gay to explore the ways that they experience and make sense of being targets of homophobia. I found that most respondents I interviewed had experienced homophobia raging from the explicit and overt to more subtle forms of homophobic microaggressions on account of being gender non-normative. For my interviewees, their parents, in particular, expressed anxieties that they were, or would become, gay. In my analysis of these experiences, I explain why some straight individuals did not utilize the concept of homophobia to categorize negative social interactions that stemmed from being perceived as gay. I also show how even gender

non-normative straight people draw on heterosexual privilege to mitigate negative social consequences that result from being read as gay. These findings illustrate how homophobia impacts people who self-identify as straight and provide a nuanced understanding of how heterosexual privilege operates in social interactions.

Straight Individuals' Experiences with Overt Homophobia and Microaggressions

All of the straight-identified people in my study knew I would ask questions pertaining to instances when they were perceived as gay. In nearly every interview, the initial descriptions of "mistaken for gay" incidents involved either being hit on by someone of the same sex or being asked about their sexual identity by a curious acquaintance or co-worker. It was rare that respondents talked about homophobic harassment or discrimination in direct response to questions about being read as gay. This was interesting because most of the men (but none of the women) in my study said homophobic epithets had been directed at them at some point in their life. During the biographical section of the interview, some of the men talked about being called a "fag" or "faggot" during middle school, high school, and/or college. Most of these men, however, did not refer back to these stories when asked to give examples of their sexuality being "misread." One possible explanation for this is that these respondents interpreted being called a "fag" as having less to do with their sexuality and more to do with being "weird" or "different." In these instances, respondents told me that "fag" was

simply an insult directed at anyone outside of the norm. In her ethnography about the construction of masculinity at a public high school, Pascoe (2007) also found that boys argued that the "fag" epithet was not about sexuality, and some students even claimed that they would never direct the insult at someone who was actually gay.

Yet in other interviews, when asked if they had experienced homophobia as a result of being perceived as gay, some respondents answered in the affirmative and offered stories of being called a "fag" as an example. When I asked Sebastian, the white 24 year-old barista who grew up in Section 8 housing in Fort Worth, if he had experienced homophobia, he responded:

> Yes…Uh-huh. Totally. Yeah, I mean mostly in the hood [as a teenager]. I mean people like called me a faggot or whatever. And then you know would like tell me not to touch them or something like that. You know like, 'I'm not shaking his hand, that dude is weird.' You know? Or [people would say] like, 'He's on the down low,' or whatever. And so then I would get mad, not because they're calling me gay, but because they're giving me shit and so you know I think people have been mean to me because they thought I was gay before in the hood. Not here [in Austin] though. Not here.

Sebastian's response is similar to that of other men in this study. First, the experience of being the target of homophobic epithets is something that largely happened in the past,

either in high school or college. Second, most of the men reported that being a target of homophobia primarily happened in places other than Austin. Sebastian, like most of the men I interviewed, did not grow up in Austin. Indicative of the importance of context, respondents who were targets of homophobic insults in the small towns and conservative cities where they grew up reported that this rarely occurred in Austin. This is not to say that it does not happen in Austin. Several respondents discussed avoiding areas of the city, like West Campus (a residential area near the University of Texas campus filled with housing for undergraduates who attend UT) or Sixth Street (an area famous for shot bars full of hard-partying college students), where they had been called "faggots." Most respondents, however, felt like there was more tolerance for difference in Austin. Third, like Sebastian, nearly all respondents distanced themselves from being homophobic. When talking about being read as gay, whether in a benign or threatening manner like the type Sebastian describes, they were quick to point out that there is nothing wrong with being gay (reminiscent of the Seinfeldian "not that there's anything wrong with it" disclaimer). Later in the chapter, I provide an analysis of these men's investment in appearing non- or anti-homophobic.

Where Sebastian's account differs from many of the men I interviewed is in his expression of emotion about being the target of the fag epithet. Surprisingly, many of the men I interviewed simply shrugged off instances of being called "fags," and even acted as if this was too obvious to be mentioned in the interview. I interpreted this type of response as indicative of the pervasiveness of homophobic insults. In shrugging off these

insults or saying "Oh, I've been called a 'fag,' of course," my respondents point to the taken-for-grantedness of harassment directed at men who do not conform to normative masculinity.

While the majority of the men I interviewed acknowledged facing verbal harassment or threats of physical violence on account of being perceived as gay and/or feminine, only a few discussed being physically attacked. When I asked Jared, 30 year-old white man who grew up in a small town 45 minutes outside of Austin, if he had experienced homophobia, he responded:

> Absolutely! Absolutely! I mean you know being called a "faggot." I got into a few fights. There was a time when I was sitting out with my friends after school in 9th grade and we were all smoking in the smoking section. Some group of guys in a big, hopped-up truck like drove up over the curb and they all hopped out. And um, I knew that with the type of truck they were driving, their style, that it wouldn't go over well. They were very macho…I knew at that point that there was going to be trouble if they saw me dressed the way I was so I sat there with my back to them and they came up and patted everyone's pockets asking for a cigarette when they didn't believe that everyone was smoking their last cigarette, which we all were. So when they saw me they were like, "Whoa!" And they backed up and were like, "Who is that faggot?" You know it was like "Fuck you!" And I was just like, "Oh my god!" You know and all my other friends

> became very uncomfortable by their presence after that knowing that there was going to be trouble. And um I was sitting there and the next thing I felt was a big jar to the back of my head. One of them had come up and like kicked me in the back of the head. And at that point I stood up and I looked at them and I put my arms out like, "What? What do you want?" you know like, "Do you want to start something?" and that's when a bunch of my skater friends with their skateboards stood up and showed them that they were willing to use their skateboards as weapons. And one of my bigger friends got up and pushed [the man who had kicked me] in the chest and told him to back the fuck off. At which point they kind of like backed off and drove away.

As I described in Chapter Four, Jared identifies with goth subculture and would often wear make-up and dress in all black clothing. This is what he refers to when he says there would be trouble if the guys in the truck saw him. Jared, like other men in my study, describes himself as effeminate. While he reported that this was one of the only incidents resulting in physical violence, he said that until he was in his mid-twenties, he was regularly called a "faggot" and a "transvestite" by both men and women passing by him in cars.

In addition to experiencing overt and explicit forms of homophobia – homophobic epithets, threats of violence, and physical attacks – on account of being perceived as gay or gender non-normative, respondents in my study told stories of more covert forms of

homophobia which could be characterized as microaggressions. Microaggressions are subtle forms of discrimination faced by members of marginalized groups. These covert slights and indignities occur in commonplace, daily interactions, and are often not recognized as harmful by the perpetrators (Sue 2010).

In my interviews, respondents talked about negative interactions that resulted from being perceived as gay, but most did not categorize these interactions as examples of homophobia or heterosexism. For example, Alex, a sweet, soft-spoken 34 year-old musician, said that when he was in his early twenties, his best friend's girlfriend was suspicious that Alex was gay and feared that he was sexually interested in her boyfriend. After she told several of their mutual friends from high school that Alex was gay, he said that these friends started acting weird around him and were less friendly when he ran into them. In another example, Derrick, a 23 year-old barista who said he is frequently "mistaken" for being gay but had not experienced homophobia on account of this, told a story about a woman he was friends with who mocked him for being expressive with his hands when he talked. After this incident Derrick became more self-conscious about his hand gestures. When talking to this friend, who he also had a romantic interest in, he consciously tried to monitor his non-verbal communication in order to avoid appearing "gay."

Both Alex and Derrick encountered indignities – being treated coldly by friends and being mocked for expressive hand gestures – as a result of being perceived as gay. In Alex's case, the differential treatment by friends after rumors had been spread about his

sexuality did not involve explicit homophobia. Instead, he was left to surmise that the shift in these relationships was connected to rumors that he was gay. In the case of Derrick, his friend mocked his hand gesture in a "joking" manner, but this had the effect of making him self-conscious about moving his body in ways that could be read as "gay." Interestingly, both of these examples of microaggressions were perpetrated by women. Most of the literature on homophobia focuses exclusively on men as perpetrators while overlooking the ways that women engage in forms of homophobia, and the ways in which women are also invested in policing masculinity. I explore this in more depth in the following chapter, which focuses on ambiguous straight men's interactions with women.

These stories illustrate the ways that homophobia, both overt and in the form of microaggressions, functions as a form of gender policing. While many of the stories are in the past tense, contained to small towns or adolescence, respondents also told stories that attest to the continuing relevance and utility of homophobia as a concept for understanding how hetero-masculine identities are performed and policed in social interactions. Derrick, for instance, only recently became self-aware of hand gestures that place his heterosexual identity in question – he has since "straightened up" by avoiding limp-wristed gesturing.

Other respondents reported engaging in impression management that involved "butching up" in response to fears of being a victim of homophobia. Julien, a white 33 year-old musician and record seller who grew up in the same town as Jared, travels to

small towns around Texas to buy record collections. He said that he is especially afraid of homophobic violence when traveling outside of Austin. Julien is a striking figure. He is tall, rail-thin, doe-eyed, and has an olive complexion. His black hair is worn in a mop-top and he sports vintage clothing from the 1960s – polyester slacks, button-downs, and Beatle boots – a look which makes him appear to be a member of a sixties garage-rock band who just stepped out of a time machine. He reported frequent harassment when traveling outside of Austin, such as being called a "fag" by passing motorists and cross looks from residents in small towns in rural Texas. He counts himself as "lucky" that he has not experienced physical violence. Julien experiences a heightened sense of self-awareness, tension, and risk in these spaces, and whether these menacing looks are real or imagined is irrelevant because this sense of tension impacts his behavior. He explained, "I try to tone down as much as possible the way that I dress. And I try to be as much of a 'guy' as possible – but I know that it still doesn't come across." When asked what this looked like, he said, "I try to like watch my mannerisms, like try to not have any effeminate hand mannerisms, or like I try to talk in a little bit lower voice, you know? Stuff like that." He describes this as a very conscious attempt to manage his gender, and by extension, his sexual identity, in spaces where he fears being a victim of homophobia. Contra optimistic arguments that homophobia is decreasing in significance, many of the men in my study report instances where they have encountered, or fear encountering, homophobic violence, and as a result they attempt to present a more conventionally masculine face as a protective measure.

These stories also highlight the continuing centrality of gender presentation as a marker of sexual identity. The men that I interviewed traced experiences of homophobia, or fears about being a target of homophobic violence and microaggressions, to being perceived as "effeminate." In other words, it was gender non-conformity, and not sexual behaviors with another man, that positioned them as a target. It is unsurprising then, that men in my study whose embodiment and aesthetic could be characterized as closer to a conventional, white, middle-class masculinity, reported that they were largely unconcerned about the threat of homophobia.

While recognizing the ways that homophobia, as a system of oppression, affects even straight-identified people is important, it is equally important to analyze the ways that straight privilege mitigates these experiences of homophobia in social interaction. Although the majority of respondents in my study of straight-identified people who are perceived as gay reported experiences of homophobia, others had no stories of experiences of homophobia or discrimination on account of being read as gay. This was particularly true of individuals who grew up in or near the city of Austin. For example, Billy, a white 29 year-old, married IT specialist, told me that he did not experience homophobia and had little fear about being a target:

> B: I didn't because…I don't necessarily think that straight men look at me and perceive me as gay. So I don't think that strangers, straight men, are lookin' at me goin' [in a mocking tone], "Hmm, look at that gay guy, what's up with him?"

Like but gay men are like, "I'm kind of interested in this guy, I'm gonna come say what's up." And so does that make sense?

T: Yeah, that does make sense.

B: It's not been a thing where I feel like I've ever been treated differently because of or you know marginalized or whatever.

Billy talked about being perceived as gay as a largely positive experience. He is flattered when men approach him and flirt with him at bars. While he is sometimes annoyed with gay men who come on to aggressively, he reported no negative experiences on account of being read as gay. As this quote makes clear, he is not typically read as gay, at least to his knowledge, by other straight men. This is likely on account of Billy's conventionally masculine appearance. At our interview, he was dressed in flip-flops, baggy plaid shorts that came to his knees, and navy t-shirt. He had recently grown a beard, which was slightly unkempt and about an inch long. He told me that he does not get "mistaken" as being gay as often since growing the beard.

Yet even men who described themselves as effeminate talked about the ways that their heterosexual desires protected them from stigma. Jaime, a 36 year-old Latino man who grew up in Mexico, told me that he did not conform to conventional forms of macho masculinity and that he did not feel pressured to try to conform. When asked about this he said:

J: I think a lot of it helped that my friends you know they knew who I was and they knew, like I mentioned earlier like they [gay men in Mexico] don't really, like if you're gay you don't really come out, right? And I was straight but sensitive – with gay qualities I guess (laughs) – but they knew I was straight. And the reason why gay men don't come out is because they are afraid people are going to reject them I think. It's not really common in Mexico. And so for me it was easy because I'm just different but I still like girls so my friends accepted me that way.

T: And so they knew you were straight?

J: Mm-hmm.

T: There weren't questions…

J: No because we would always talk about girls and oh, "I really like this girl". But they would always like her because of how she looked and for me it was like, "oh, that girl she really had a good conversation, yk? She's really sweet and I want to go out with her again." So it was very different, it was more of I want to get to know her.

While Jaime distances himself from aspects of hegemonic masculinity, like talking about women in objectifying ways or being unemotional, he still openly discusses his desires for women, and in doing so signals that he is a straight man. As Dean (2014) found, even straight men who are non-homophobic or anti-homophobic still attempt to

retain straight privilege through their discussion of girlfriends, wives, or women they are romantically interested in. In fact it was common for respondents in my study to talk about female romantic partners, or to talk about women they were attracted to, in order to signal their straight identity to others. While straight-identified men were not immune from being targets of homophobia, largely because of gender practices that could be coded as "feminine," they utilized relationships with and desires for women to mitigate against social sanctions directed at gay people.

The assessment of risk in relation to being "mistaken" as gay is also refracted through racialized experiences. It is necessary to highlight that nearly all of the men in my study are white, able-bodied, middle-class men. As such, their gender socialization likely resulted in an entitlement to move through spaces without the need to be on guard against threats of violence that women and men of color are required to be vigilant about. This was highlighted in my interview with Nestor, a 21 year old Latino man who was born and raised in Austin. Nestor was a short man with a medium build. His curly black hair flopped down over his youthful face. He was dressed in a tight fitting striped t-shirt, tight black cut-off jean shorts, and Vans canvas sneakers. His eyes were puffy and he looked like he had not slept the night before. At the start of the interview he admitted he was hung over from a party held the previous night at the coffee shop where he worked as a barista.

Unlike most of the men in my sample, Nestor claimed that he was never harassed in middle school or high school for being perceived as gay. He attributed this to his

fortune of attending a magnet school for gifted and talented students. He claimed that he did not even witness homophobia or the use of the fag "epithet" at this his school. While he said he was occasionally called a "fag" near the UT campus, he largely avoids areas where frat boys might target him and in general he feels safe and comfortable in Austin. When I asked Nestor if he ever feared being perceived as gay outside of Austin, he replied, with a youthful arrogance, as he did to all of my questions, that he does not travel to rural parts of Texas: "It's not really something I want to do – I'm sure there are really beautiful parts that I just probably would not feel comfortable visiting. Because I'm also Hispanic. And my mom like grew up being discriminated against, like not being served at a gas station or something because you know she had darker skin, you know? And so that is also back there as well." In other words, Nestor's perception of risk is as much about being a target of racism on account of his "darker skin" as it is fear of being a target of homophobia because he comes across as effeminate. For the white men in my study, fear of victimization is more easily reduced to a fear of being read as gay, which they can attempt to mitigate by "butching up" their performance of gender.

"You better not turn out to be gay": Parental Concerns about Sexual Identity

Within a heteronormative sexual regime, the naturalization of heterosexuality means that it is rarely questioned. Because it is the taken-for-granted sexual identity, people are typically assumed to be heterosexual unless there are outward signs, like

gender nonconformity, that raise doubts about this status. This means that while gays and lesbians are often called on to account for their sexual identity, heterosexuals are largely exempt from questions about theirs (Jackson and Scott 2010). For example, no one typically asks heterosexual people to explain when they realized they were straight or how their parents reacted to their heterosexuality. Yet, as my interviews demonstrate, this is not always the experience of straight-identified people, particularly when they are gender non-normative. This was illustrated by one question in particular during my interviews. In an overwhelming majority of interviews, the question, "Growing up, were your parents concerned about your sexual orientation?" struck a nerve with interviewees. Many respondents laughed immediately, raising their eyebrows and nodding their heads vigorously, in response to the question, while others exclaimed, "Oh yeah!" Out of all the questions in the interviews, questions regarding parents' concerns about the interviewee's sexual identity generated the most visibly emotional responses.

As with the experiences discussed in the previous section, interactions with parents pertaining to sexual identity ranged from explicitly violent to more subtle forms of homophobia. When I asked Sebastian if his parents thought he was gay, he responded in the affirmative and provided a context for why his parents questioned his sexuality. He said that when he was 16 years old he started listening to punk rock and dressing like a punk:

> I was wearing like stretch pants and a lot of weird stuff and [my dad] would always have little things to say about that, you know like, "You wear those pants that make you look like a faggot." And then as a way to sort of like get back at him I would prance around like, "Oh, what kind of faggot? Am I pretty to you?" and then he would get upset. You know so we would push each other in those ways where if he wanted to make me out to be gay then I was gonna be more gay than he was comfortable with. But all the while we were having this negotiation, this sort of symbolic war you know where he was like, "This is what a man is supposed to be" and I was like, "This is me not doing that," you know? And uh so…It was a fine line because at times he would be in a better mood and like just laugh, like I can't believe you'd do that, you know? And that was fine, but at other times he would be more divisive about it, like, "So you have a girlfriend?" and I'm like, "Yeah." And he's like, "Well that's good." And I'm like, "Hmmm…", you know things like that.

Sebastian was not the only person who told me that their father had called them a "faggot." Darren, the 28 year-old white man who grew up in the suburbs of Cincinnati, OH also recounted a story about when he dyed his hair red and his father angrily told him that this made him "look like a faggot" and that he was going to have to cut his hair off. Darren was also a member of the gay-straight alliance at his school, and his father would ask him whether he was the "straight" part of the alliance. In both of these instances,

Sebastian and Darren encountered policing of their gender and sexuality in the form of their father's use of the fag epithet. Sebastian's story illustrates how his heterosexuality was called into question by his father and had to be demonstrated through having a girlfriend. While gender normative straight people do not have to "come out" as straight to their parents, this was not true for many of the individuals in my study.

While Sebastian and Darren encountered questioning of their sexuality by parents while in high school, others told stories of parental anxiety that manifested at earlier ages. Julien, who I described earlier in the chapter, was raised by his mother and aunt. He told me that they had concerns about his gender and sexuality because he was being raised without a man in the house. When I asked for examples of these anxieties he responded that he could primarily feel this concern in the way they looked at him and watched what he did. He also said:

> I have this very specific memory, which is key, of my mother, when I was probably pretty young – I must have been 6, 7, 8 years-old, somewhere in that range – like of my mother accosting me in the car telling me, "You better not turn out to be gay." And I didn't really understand what that meant at the time, you know? But I did understand it to mean something bad, you know? And when I figured it out, of course I became worried about it. I think that that's always played a guilt thing for me. It's always been in that part of my head. And you know I had a Catholic upbringing so there's all that guilt, you know?

When I asked Julien why he thought his mother felt the need to confront him in this way, he recalled another story about how he liked to make crafts around this time. His family owned a restaurant and Julien would often use restaurant supplies for his crafts. One time he made pillows by stuffing napkins that were stapled together and then drew on the pillows. When his mother and aunt found these "pillows" they ripped them up and explained to him that "boys don't make things like that." Julien speculates that his engagement in "feminine" activities like crafting and his eschewing of "masculine" activities like sports, combined with the absence of a father-figure in his life, led to concerns that he would turn out to be gay.

Julien also recounted stories about his grandparents', whom he described as "conservative," anxieties about his sexual orientation. He said that his grandfather "constantly" told him to "toughen up," "cut his hair," change the way he dressed, and join the army. His grandparents were "really afraid" about his friendship with Jared, whose story of an encounter with homophobic violence was described earlier. Julien says his grandparents talked to him about their fears that Jared would "turn him gay." Julien responded by trying to assure his grandparents that Jared was straight by asserting that he was "really, really into women." However, Julien said his grandparents could not understand and accept this based on Jared's effeminate appearance. He recounted a poignant story of an incident that occurred soon after the end of high school when Jared was "crashing" at Julien's grandparents' house:

> I was living back in [his hometown 45 minutes outside of Austin] but would drive out to Austin to hang out with friends and I remember coming home late one night after going out to some bars and Jared was kind of like crashing with my family – he wasn't living in Austin and his family wouldn't take him back into the house – so he was kind of staying with us. And I remember coming home and he was sleeping in the bed that I normally slept in so I just slept on the other side of the bed. And I remember like my grandparents busting in in the morning and being like *insanely* upset about that. And I had slept in my clothes in case something like that happened. I slept totally clothed on top of the sheets, and he was under the sheets on the other side. But I just remember them busting in and like kicking him out and cursing at him, and they were like really harsh, really harsh to him. And then them just not talking to me for a little while.

Julien attributes his grandparents' homophobia to their "traditional" upbringing in Mexico. In the story recounted above, Julien consciously tries to avoid a "misreading" of the situation by sleeping fully-clothed and on top of the covers. Despite these efforts, his grandparents reacted based on the fear that Jared had turned Julien gay.

In the above examples, respondents were directly confronted by parents or other family members with concerns that they were, or could become, gay. In another example, Dylan, a 35 year-old physician who lives in St. Louis, recalled a time when he

overheard a conversation between his parents about his decision to live with his uncle, an out gay man, in New Orleans:

> D: I remember like overhearing my mom and dad talking when uh when I had decided to move to New Orleans for a year between college and med school. I remember my dad expressing concern that (laughs) that my uncle was uh going to somehow make me gay…So (laughs) um and it struck me as as odd because you know my dad is not you know otherwise overtly homophobic or anything like that um but uh but yeah and I remember my mom said well that's ridiculous.
>
> T: And how did, what did you think when you heard that – his concern about that?
>
> D: Um well you know it uh it struck me as surprising but uh just because I didn't expect it (laughs). I didn't expect my dad to say uh to say something like that and I remember being a little disappointed in his reaction but that was about it.

In Dylan's case, he had not been aware of parental concerns about this sexual orientation until this incident. While this example is not about a parent expressing concern that their child is gay, it does illustrate a respondent's encounter with the homophobic belief that exposure to gay people can turn a straight person gay. In this instance, Dylan expresses disappointment with his father's concern, and at the same time distances himself from being homophobic.

Like Dylan, other respondents encountered parental concerns about sexual identity that did not involve specific injunctions against being gay or the use of homophobic epithets. Kerry, a 28 year-old white woman in graduate school for biology, told me that her parents thought she was gay because she wore men's clothes and had short, dyed hair in high school. At the interview, Kerry was dressed in a plain white t-shirt, blue jeans, and dirt stained, white canvas tennis shoes. Her straight, dirty-blonde hair was shoulder length and unstylized. She described herself as a t-shirt and jeans girl who rarely wore make-up. After lighting up her second cigarette of the interview, Kerry recounted in her loud, husky voice:

> I knew that they, they probably still think I'm gay. Like I definitely think that it was worrisome to them [that I wore men's clothes]. But I definitely know that they thought I was gay and they made it clear that they weren't gonna be / that they would be sad if that was my life just because I think they were afraid that I would suffer…as a result of being gay, especially coming from their generation. They saw a lot of their gay friends go through a lot so they / I knew that they didn't want that for me. But I mean other than expressing that they didn't really say much about it.

When I asked her how she knew they felt this way, she responded:

> My mom, I think one day in the car said – I don't even know how it came up – she might have said like – we were just talking about gay people or something – and she said it would make her sad if I were gay because my life would be filled with a lot more pain as a result. Which I thought was kind of a funny thing cuz you know your life is going to be filled with pain just because that's fucking life or whatever [laughs]. But I mean I think, I think she had, she meant it in a well-intentioned way but I mean the way that comes off I think if I were gay that would have been a really traumatic conversation to have with someone, where they were like, "You're gonna be disappointing me" or something like that. Um but fortunately I never had to have that conversation with them. But yeah I've been pretty private about my relationship life. I had a really long term relationship with a guy when was like college age. So I think that that kind of took them, and I had dated guys in high school and stuff so they knew that I was dating men. But I still was wearing men's clothes all the time. I mean it's something that would be obvious for a sort of a normal parent to be concerned about if they're not like super pumped on the idea of their child being gay! [laughs]

Like the men I interviewed, Kerry connects her parents' belief that she was gay to her gender nonconformity. She acknowledges that "normal" parents will see gender nonconformity as a sign that their child is gay. In Kerry's case, her female friends

dressed the same way she did. While most of the these friends identified as straight in high school, many of them came out as lesbian later in life. Kerry laughs about the fact that she is one of the only people from her group of high school friends who still identifies as "straight." Based on this experience, she recognizes gender nonconformity as a sign of same-sex desire, yet she knows that sexuality cannot be directly linked to gender presentation, as her own personal experience attests.

Unlike the stories of the men in this section, Kerry's parents couch their concerns about her sexual identity in terms of wanting to protect her from harm in a homophobic society. As Kerry's story indicates, her parents had gay friends. Despite this fact, her parents' attitudes toward her gender presentation and sexuality did not create a gay-affirmative environment for Kerry, as is evident in her relief that she did not have to "disappoint" her parents by telling them she was gay. This relief is also tied to Kerry's heterosexual privilege: as a person who knows and feels that she is straight, she is spared from having to come out to parents who explicitly acknowledged the sadness that would accompany having a gay child. Furthermore, while this experience was upsetting, Kerry is self-reflective enough to recognize that it would have been especially traumatic if she was gay. Her sense of herself as a straight person made this conversation more confusing than traumatic. However, despite the way her straightness attenuated the pain, her mother's statements serve as a warning of the consequences of being gay, and works to foreclose the possibility that being gay is good and worthy of recognition and even celebration.

Kerry's story, like Sebastian's, also highlights how parents can be reassured of their child's heterosexuality, even in the face of gender non-conformity, if the child is actively dating members of the other sex. In other words, the performance of heterosexuality through active dating mitigates some suspicions that arise on account of gender "deviance." Yet, as I demonstrate in the next section, romantic involvement with members of the other sex does not always shore up a straight identity or protect ambiguous straights from a diagnosis of internalized homophobia.

Attributions of Internalized Homophobia

Interestingly, in response to the question, "Have you ever experienced homophobia as a result of being misread?" several of the respondents were quick to tell me that they were not homophobic. For example, when I asked Jared this question, he responded: "Um, I was never homophobic but at the same time I would try to make it clear to men that were hitting on me that I wasn't gay." In this interview, and in others when this occurred, I clarified that I was asking whether the interviewee had experienced homophobia directed towards them. I initially thought that this was a simple misinterpretation of the question. After this occurred in many interviews, I began to realize how invested these men were in distancing themselves from homophobia. While this could be interpreted as an example of social desirability bias, or the tendency of respondents to answer questions according to what they think the researcher wants to

hear, this insistence on not being homophobic also played a role in the construction of a heterosexual identity.

The concept of homophobia was intended to explain not only fear and hatred directed at gay people, but, equally important, was conceptualized as something that is internalized by gays and lesbians. As a concept developed during the gay rights movement of the 1970s, it offered a psychological explanation of why gay people were in the closet and why they resisted calls by gay rights activists to come out and publicly embrace their "true" sexual identity. Activists argued that growing up in a society that pathologized homosexuality resulted in an internalized fear and self-loathing of same-sex desires and sexual practices. As I show in the previous chapter, the idea of internalized homophobia remains highly salient in popular discourses about sexual identity. Straight-identified men who are believed to be gay, or who are caught engaging in same-sex behavior, like former U.S. Senator Larry Craig, are frequently accused of being self-loathing closet-cases by gays and straights alike. In the popular imagination, overt expressions of homophobia are typically read as indicating an internalized self-loathing. Being homophobic is thereby interpreted as a projection of one's own fears of being gay and an indication that one is not "secure" in their heterosexuality. Given this popular discourse, it was unsurprising that many of the men in my study told me they were "comfortable" admitting that they found some men attractive, were "secure" about their sexual identity, and were not homophobic. It also helps to explain why some men responded to my question about experiences of homophobia by stating that they were

never homophobic: they interpreted "experiences of homophobia" as referring to the internalized form of this "phobia."

While most of the men in my study told me that they were not homophobic, and that they also did not go through periods of questioning their own sexual identity, some men did discuss times in their lives when they were afraid that they might be gay. This is explicit in the story told by Julien earlier in this chapter. His mother's warning, "You better not turn out to be gay," led to feelings of guilt and worry regarding his sexuality. Dylan also talked about being afraid that he was gay. When I asked him if there were ever periods when he questioned his sexual identity, he responded:

> Yeah, when when I was young. Um probably I don't know when, I was sort of somewhere in the 9-12 area. Uh, you know I remember a period of questioning – I kind of went through a stage of just uh being attracted anybody and then it occurred to me well maybe I'm you know maybe I'm gay [voice gets quieter]. And then I think I was kind of just, it kind of popped in as a fear just because you know at least at the time and that place there certainly was a stigma attached with it. But um [pause] but the past that was kind of the extent of it, it wasn't uh [pause] it wasn't [pause] uh it didn't get to point where I was thinking you know uh uh attracted to same-sex or bi-curious or anything like that. It was kind of kind of an asexual stage and I think probably because of the stigma that kind of popped into my head as fear. I remember you know one night thinking about that

> [nervously laughs]. Uh but but I can't say when it exactly it was. Uh or how long that uh that lasted but uh [pause] it was roughly during that time [9-12 years old] I think.

Dylan was obviously uncomfortable in discussing this, and his incoherent response is rife with contradictions. He claims that he did not get to the point where he actually had attraction for members of the same sex, but this contradicts the earlier remark that he was "attracted to anybody," which contradicts the later remark that he was "asexual" at this stage in his life. What is clear is that he was afraid of even the possibility that he could be gay because he knew that this was a stigmatized identity. This story, like the one Julien told, demonstrates that some straight-identified men do experience, and are aware of, fears that they might be gay. It is worth pointing out that these accounts relegate these anxieties to the past, and as such shore up a secure heterosexual self that overcame fears about being gay.

While only a few men acknowledged or admitted to having experienced anxieties about their sexual orientation, several of the people I interviewed recounted times when they had been accused of being closeted. As discussed in the previous chapter, I asked Jared if I could interview him for this project because he had posted the following status update on Facebook: "For the last time, world, I'm not gay!" He expressed great frustration at being perceived as gay. For Jared, even a woman he was dating asked if he was gay. When I asked what she said in response to his assertion that he was straight, he

told me: "She said, 'You've got be at least bi. Tell me! You've got to at least be bi. I can't understand you being the way that you are and not being at least bi.' It's like, 'I think it's a matter of time before you come out of the closet.'" Jared also talked about this annoyance with "assertive" gay men who hit on him at clubs. When I asked how he responded to being hit on by men, he replied:

> If they're touching me I push them away. If they ask me for my number I tell them, well if I can tell they're gay, I tell them flat out right away, "I'm not gay just so you know." A lot of the time they think, "Oh whatever, you just haven't come out of the closet yet." Like, "You're just queer bait." Or like, "You're just out there to fuck with my head – how dare you." And they take it personal, like being rejected. [Many of these men] don't believe me because they think that, "Well, maybe you just haven't owned up to it yet. You just haven't come out of the closet and it's just a matter of time so let me be that guy to push you in that direction." Like, "I want to be that guy." You know, "I'll show you what you really want" kind of thing.

As Jared tells it, he is assumed to be a "closeted" gay man who has not yet "owned" up to being gay. Essentially, Jared describes the experience of being put in the closet by gay men who are frustrated by his rejection of their advances. In his telling, there is also an

excitement for gay men who want to pull him out of the closet by showing him "what he really wants" to do sexually.

Kerry also described experiences of being "put in the closet," albeit in a different context. When I asked how she knew that people perceived her as being a lesbian, she said:

> The actual stories I know um I know a lot of my queer, my gay friends that are women, like their girlfriends have found me very threatening. And they've / their girlfriends have insisted that I'm gay. That I just don't know it or I'm not admitting it to myself. And in part I think I know those stories because those stories are easier to tell me than like them saying, "I think you're gay!" (laughs). Like it's more like, "My girlfriend thinks you're gay and you are threatening to her" or whatever. And so those are the stories I know more about. And I know lots of stories like that where I've had you know a lesbian friend whose girlfriend did not like me.

When I asked how she responded to this, she replied, "I've talked to my friends about it and told them how I feel about my gender identity and also about my sexual identity to be clear about it cuz I actually feel relatively secure, I think um [pause] about how I identify at this point in my life." Kerry, like Jared, expresses a great deal of frustration with people who assume she is being dishonest about her sexual identity:

> I will say that that's really infuriating 'cause I feel like I've spent a lot of time, like there was a period of my life where I really wanted to figure that out and for someone who had been told that they were gay like it was important to me to figure it out. And to have a lot friends who were gay and like know that I thought that was a good decision for them like I want, I was okay with that potential. It's kind of annoying to have people telling you that you're not being self-aware and when you feel like you've spent a lot of effort in your life to be self-aware! [laughs] Or whatever. It's like you don't even know me! I'm a very thoughtful person or I try to be or whatever. [laughs]

In this response, Kerry points to her efforts to reflect on and figure out her sexual identity, which was especially important for her, in a way that it might not be for most straight people, because she had been suspected of being gay. She also tries to make clear that even though she does not consider herself to be gay, this is not the result of internalized homophobia. She respects and affirms friends' decisions to come out as gay, and was open to that potential for herself. However, Kerry has only been in relationships with men, finds herself primarily attracted to men, and is currently in a long term relationship with man. Similar to Sean's assertion, "*nothing* is wrong with being gay, I'm just not that," Kerry finds nothing wrong with being gay, in fact, she even considered the possibility that she might be gay. However, after time spent reflecting on her

sexuality, she does not find the label "lesbian" to be an accurate or honest description of her sexual identity.

Conclusion

My interviews highlight the ways that straight-identified individuals experience and make sense of homophobia on account of being perceived as gay. In my interviews, most respondents recounted experiences of either explicit and overt homophobia (e.g. homophobic insults, threats of violence, physical assaults) or more subtle forms of homophobic microaggressions (e.g. being treated coldly in social encounters, joking about body comportment, strange looks in public spaces). While many of the people I interviewed did label these experiences as instances of homophobia, others either did not explicitly connect these types of interactions to homophobia or they explicitly denied that they were examples of homophobia. These cases where explicit connections were not made are telling of the ways that "homophobia" is commonly understood as something that is obvious and overt, such as being called a "fag," being physically attacked, or being denied a job because one is gay. While respondents usually labeled these kinds of incidents as examples of being a target of homophobia, incidents that could arguably be categorized as microaggressions were typically not given as examples of negative impacts of being read as gay. In some cases, respondents who reported being called "fags" interpreted these insults as having nothing to do with being perceived as gay.

Instead, these respondents argued that "fag" and "faggot" were epithets that were directed at anyone who was different from the local norm. This explanation highlights an understanding of homophobia as being linked directly to stigmatizing same-sex desires. As Pascoe (2007) has argued, homophobia is as much about policing gender as it is sexuality. While respondents may be correct that being called a "fag" did not mean those hurling the insult did so because they thought the respondent was "actually" gay, it was typically the case that these insults were directed at gender practices that were not normatively masculine. My interviews demonstrate the need to account for homophobia directed not just at LGBT individuals, but also for homophobic violence and microaggressions directed at straight-identified people who are perceived as gay. My respondents' experiences show that one need not be gay or identify as gay to be the target of homophobia (see also Pascoe 2007). In interaction, it is enough to be perceived as gay, and these attributions of a gay identity are most frequently based on gender nonconformity.

Although respondents talked about experiences with homophobia, many also said they generally did not mind being read as gay. In support of Bridges' (2014) arguments about straight men who describe aspects of themselves as "gay," many of the men in my study experienced being "mistaken" as gay to be pleasurable. They were flattered when gay men flirted with them and many expressed a genuine enjoyment in the attention they received in these encounters. Moreover, being seen as gay validates their sense of difference from the "typical" man, who they strive to distance themselves from. In this

way, being read as gay confirms feelings that they are more enlightened than the conventionally masculine man who is framed as retrograde due to his objectification of women, inability to express a range of emotion, and lack of style and taste.

And yet, I found a great deal of ambivalence about the experience of being a straight-identified man who is read as gay in social interactions. While aspects of this phenomenon were described as pleasurable, many of the men in my study, particularly those who described themselves as effeminate, shared painful stories of being targets of homophobia. In many of these stories, their straight identity, and their desires for members of the other sex, did not protect them from overt and subtle forms of homophobia. Furthermore, their ambiguous sexual identity often produced complications surrounding their interactions with women, which I explore in the next chapter.

Chapter Six: The Gay Best Friend and the Wolf in Sheep's Clothing: Ambiguously Straight Men's Interactions with Women

In the early stages of conceptualizing this project, I came across an article titled, "Nice Guys Don't Wear Leather," on *Bleach*, an online magazine produced in Austin that is devoted to "art, fashion, music, and culture." The article, written by Ashton Smothermon (2010), began with the following:

> I love Austin. I love tall buildings that look like owls, South by Southwest, sweltering summer days, etc. What I do not like is dating in Austin. Seriously, the dating pool here is shallow and stagnant. A friend of mine once said, "I meet the same girl every night. They just have different names." Well, I meet the same five guys every night, and they all fucking suck.

This lead-in was followed by a list of five types of guys to avoid dating in Austin. The list included guys like "The Greasy Leaner" – "This guy is constantly leaning against some wall, trying to look cool smoking a cigarette. He doesn't shower – only bathes – because he wants to keep his hair greasy, and will only leave his leaning wall to go do lines in the bathroom." And "The Guy Who's Slept with Everyone" – "Yeah, he's banged a lot of chicks, a few of which you know, but he's so sweet! Things will be different with you. He really cares. (You know this is how he got those other girls into bed too, right?)." And then there was the "Gay Straight Guy," who Smothermon

describes as: “What a little trickster! This guy is well-dressed and flamboyant to the nth degree. You spend a night out with your new gay friend dancing and being silly, then he tries to make out with you! Probably because he's straight.” This description of the “gay straight guy” points to straight men’s adoption of gay aesthetics that masculinities scholars have documented (Coad 2008; Dean 2014; Bridges 2014). Smothermon’s “gay straight guy” is painted as a wolf in sheep’s clothing who deceives straight women looking for a gay best friend. The concern here about a man’s sexual orientation is the opposite of the one expressed by Josie Cotton (see Introduction). For Smothermon, the question is, “Johnny, are you straight?”

In this chapter, I examine the ways men in my study talked about their interactions with women. Most research on men focuses on the ways hetero-masculinities are performed for, and policed by, other men. Highlighting the “homosocial enactment” of masculinity is important (Kimmel 2001), but it overlooks the ways women are involved in the construction of straight men’s gender and sexual identities (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). In this chapter, I analyze men’s stories about women’s misrecognition of their straight identity. I focus on two tropes – the “gay best friend” and the “wolf in sheep’s clothing” – that describe ambiguous straight men’s interactions with women. First, I discuss men’s experiences with and interpretations of being placed in the role of the “gay best friend.” Next, I illustrate how men offer pragmatic and ethical justifications for “coming out” as straight to women. Finally, I

show that while most men claimed to not lead women on, some men do engage with women in ways described by the wolf in sheep's clothing trope.

The Gay Best Friend

Respondents' answers to my questions, "How do you know that people think that you are gay? Can you give me specific examples of times when you felt you were being misread?," (see Appendix I for the full Interview Gide) tended to focus explicitly on interactions with gay men or straight women. It is safe to assume that many, but not all, of the instances of homophobia described by respondents involved interactions with straight men. However, as I discussed in the previous chapter, these were typically not the examples given in response to the questions above. Instead, many respondents immediately talked about getting hit on by men as moments when they knew they were being read as gay. Here, it is important to remember that the accounts given in my study only reveal the *subjective interpretations of the interviewee*. It is entirely possible that (1) these men only imagined being hit on, (2) that the men hitting on them actually read them as straight men, and (3) that the men who were hitting on them were also straight-identified. With that caveat in mind, the interactions my respondents interpreted as expressions of sexual or romantic interest from gay men included prolonged stares, excessive eye contact, flirtatious banter, compliments about their appearance, requests for their phone number, being asked out, and being danced with or groped at clubs and bars.

For the most part, the men in my study professed being amused or even flattered by these encounters. Several respondents said that they liked the attention and enjoyed flirting back in response. The exception to this, as Jared and Billy talked about in the previous chapter, were instances when interested men were being "pushy," "aggressive," or when they refused take "no" for an answer. While it may be "true" that these men experienced being hit on by other men as mostly positive, the disavowal of any anxiety regarding these interactions is also part of performing a self-assured heterosexual identity. This takes on added importance for men whose sexuality is sometimes read as ambiguous. Furthermore, as men, they do not encounter being approached in public spaces or receiving unwanted sexual advances with the frequency that women do. As such, dealing with flirtation is likely experienced as more of a novelty and less of a nuisance or a threat to personal safety.

Most men in my study were quick to list receiving men's advances as examples of "mistaken for gay" incidents. They were less likely to talk about being read as gay by women in response to the initial question. These stories tended to come up when I asked if they were "misread" by men, women, or both, and when I asked if they were ever perceived as gay by romantic partners. In contrast to the mostly positive or neutral feelings they discussed regarding their interactions with gay men, their stories about being perceived as gay by straight women revealed feelings of frustration and anxiety. One obvious explanation for this is that in interactions with gay men they were the pursued, while in the stories about women they were the pursuer who was rejected. As

the stories below reveal, being misread by women was also considered more damning of their hetero-masculinity than being hit on by men.

"She thought I was like her gay BFF"

Experiencing rejection by a romantic interest is surely unpleasant for most people; yet facing rejection on account of being "mistaken" as gay was presented as particularly upsetting and confusing by some of my interviewees. Sean, the man introduced at the beginning of Chapter Four, recounted an experience that could be described as traumatic. When I asked Sean if he dated in college, he replied:

> S: Mm-hmm. Yeah. Um the first person I dated, it turns out she thought I was gay! [laughs]
>
> TB: One of my questions was actually about that.
>
> S: She thought I was like her gay BFF. Uh that was shock. That was the first time, that was the first time I experienced someone like misreading me as gay and realized very viscerally that it was about my sexuality. Because I thought I was dating [laughs] somebody.

Sensing my confusion about this story, he explained, "Um we had made out a bunch of times, like we had what I would describe as like a very typical college um, we were only

together for a few weeks – but like the beginnings of a college relationship." With some embarrassment, he recounted how he asked her if she wanted to be his "girlfriend on Facebook." By this, he meant making the relationship "Facebook official" by changing their "relationship statuses" from "single" to "in a relationship" on the social networking website. Sean continued,

> She was like, "What do you mean?" I go, "Like on Facebook, do you want to be my girlfriend?" And she goes, "But you're gay!" And I was like, "No, I'm not." And she goes, "Yes, you are." And I was like, "Shit!" I'm like [laughs], how am I losing this argument? [laughs] And I'm like, "We made out! A bunch of times!" And she was like, "I just thought that's what all gay people did." Direct quote.

In retrospect, Sean chalks this experience up to this woman's provincial naiveté:

> And when you think about Purdue, this gal was like an Indiana gal who went to Purdue and everybody thinks that college is when you go and do weird stuff, you know? And so she was like, she had a gay friend, she'd probably never met a gay person before and yeah, she made out with one a bunch of times. She had no idea what she was dealing with and [said in a self-mocking maudlin tone] I just had my heartbroken.

When I responded with an, "Aww," Sean continued trying to downplay the pain of the experience, "No, it wasn't that bad. We only 'dated' for a few weeks."

I wondered how Sean could have been unaware that this woman thought he was gay. He claimed to have been caught completely off-guard and asserts that none of his friends suspected this either:

> I lived in a dorm so my roommate, everybody, when I went back I was just shattered. And I was like, I didn't want to tell anybody, right? So they were all like, "What happened?" And I just said that we broke up. And I couldn't tell them why, right? Because I was still so freaked out by it. But yeah, they, so it was very clear to everybody but her [laughs], I think, that we were a couple.

Sean concluded this story by admitting, with embarrassment, that he continued trying to convince this woman that he was straight: "I was just still like her gay friend even though I tried to convince her I was straight. Like it didn't work. And so I, for like two weeks I was like, 'I can convince her that I am straight.' You can't. That's not a fun game to play. That's not a healthy game."

Undoubtedly Sean is not the only college freshman to mistake "making out a bunch of times" with someone as an indication of being in a romantic relationship. While unrequited interest might have been embarrassing, this woman's insistence that Sean was

gay "freaked" him out and made him ashamed to tell his friends why he had been rejected. It also shook his self-confidence in his sexual identity – as quoted above, this was the first time he "realized very viscerally" that being called "gay" was about his sexuality. He explained, "So when I was in high school everybody called me 'gay' but it was like everybody called everybody 'gay' in high school [laughs] – 'That locker is gay' [laughs]. Yeah, so I realized it didn't have anything to do with my sexuality." As I discussed in the last chapter, several other men in the study also interpreted being called "gay" or a "fag" as general insults that had nothing to do with perceptions of their sexual identity.

Several months later, Sean said he once again found himself consigned to the role of "gay best friend" by another woman he thought he was "dating." This, in addition to other incidents, convinced him, "Oh, this is about my sexuality – this isn't like people being jerks. Like this is a real thing." Unlike in high school, when he brushed off being called "gay" as a general insult, Sean began to genuinely question his sexual identity in response to being labeled "gay" by women he had been intimate with: "I was like, 'Okay, maybe I'm gay?' You know, if it looks like a duck [laughs], from polling the audience on this one [laughs]." Sean began going to the LGBTQ resource center on his campus to seek help in sorting through his sexual identity crisis:

> I was like, "*Well, what's happening*? Why do people, I think I'm straight, like I'm pretty sure that I am, like here's what I think that means [laughs]. What *does*

> *this mean*? Like what does that feel like? What does that feel like to be gay? Um, and in those conversations we realized pretty quick that it had nothing to do with my sexuality and pretty much everything to do with my gender. And then I was freaked out because I'm like, "Am I not a 'man'?! [laughs]. So I go from like this terrifying like, "Am I not straight?" which is *horrible* in this society, which sucks, but I was like I thought I had that one. And then like after being like, 'Okay, I'm good on that,' it's like but then I'm questioning my man-ness and manhood and I've been questioning that ever since. Um and it's gone from like a fearful questioning to a more inquisitive, genuine-like curiosity over the past several years, um but it's, none-the-less, it's still something that I question on a regular basis.

While sexuality is often believed to be pre-social and biologically determined (Weeks 1985; Seidman 1997), Sean's experience highlights how sexuality cannot be disentangled from the social. Even though Sean was "pretty sure" he was straight, his doubts stemmed from how he was read by others. In other words, sexual identities, like all identities are constructed in interaction (Goffman 1959). As with gender identities (Lucal 1999; Schilt 2011), sexual identities are social accomplishments that rely upon recognition from others.

According to Sean's understanding of sexuality at the time, people are *either* "straight" *or* "gay," and these identities entail two distinctly different ways of feeling.

Yet Sean recognized that "straight" and "gay" are not simply different but equal identities. In a heteronormative culture, being straight is constructed as the normal, natural, and superior form of sexuality in relation to being gay. This is what Sean referred to when he said not being straight is "horrible" in this society. What Sean feared was a loss of his straight privilege.

Again demonstrating how sexual identities are produced through interaction, Sean was reassured, through conversations at the LGBTQ resource center, that he was straight when he discovered that gender and sexuality are distinct from one another. However, just when his straightness, and the corresponding privilege, was restored – "Okay, I'm good on that" – his gender identity as a man was undermined. The "horribleness" of not being a man in this society, and the fear that he would lose male privilege, is implied in his telling of this story. The recuperation of his heterosexuality through the disarticulation of gender expression and sexual identity came with a price. Sean had to confront the possibility that he is not a "man," equated in his mind with conforming to the norms of masculinity, because he is "misperceived" as gay. While he said that this initially scared him, he claimed to overcome this fear and continues questioning what it means to be a man to this day. As I described in Chapter 4, Sean asserted that he eventually came to embrace the identity of a "feminine man." This narrative follows a trajectory found in other interviews – initial feelings of anxiety about being "mistaken" for gay which are followed by an increasing comfort and security in one's straight identity, despite being misrecognized by others.

"Normal guys…they'll bring a girl home"

William, the 31 year-old Latino man I described in Chapter 4, also talked about being placed in the role of "gay best friend" by women he was interested in dating. When I asked him why he decided to participate in the study, he told me that he saw my flyer on the UT campus. He took a photo of the flyer and posted it on his Facebook profile with a caption stating that he took one of the tabs. He said that a couple friends commented in response, "No, no way. You?" and "I never thought that of you." William rejected his friends' disbelief that he is "mistaken as gay:" "But I know. You know I've lived my life, I've seen, I've experienced my experiences and I know that sometimes it comes up." He went to say that, "Yeah, I guess maybe some friends don't think about it that way, but I know that some other friends uh, I don't know, it's like ambiguous when they meet me: 'Is he gay? Is he not gay? What's going on?'" As I discussed in Chapter 4, I witnessed an encounter where William interpreted an interaction as a "mistaken for gay" incident. He told me that he sometimes anticipates people asking him directly about his sexual identity. For example, he recounted a recent interaction when a female co-worker said, "Hey William, I have a question." In response, he immediately replied, "No, I'm not gay," and he laughed as he told me that he was correct in anticipating her question.

Sean reported that he regularly dates women, and has had long term relationships with women, though he is currently single. William, in contrast, has not been successful in the dating scene. When I asked him if he had girlfriends in high school or college, he responded: "I had one girlfriend in high school. We dated for like two weeks. Um, in my freshman year of college uh I met a girl and we became really good friends and we eventually became friends with benefits, which was a mistake." When I asked why it was a mistake, he replied, "One person is always going to like the other person more. And she liked me more than I liked her. But really I've only had one girlfriend my entire life and that was the high school girlfriend I dated for two weeks." William said this was not due to a lack of interest or effort. He told me that he had recently started trying to meet women through online dating sites and that he had a date the following evening.

William believes some people see him as sexually ambiguous because he has not had romantic relationships with women. When I asked William if his parents ever expressed concern that he might be gay, he began by talking about his openly gay older brother:

> W: You would think that it would be my dad who um, who would be the one who would be praying for my brother, or who would be bothered by the whole gay thing but he was always really cool with it. When my brother came out he was like, "Alright, you're gay, that's fine." My mom is the one who, the night my brother came out she took him into a room and started praying with him. Um so I

think it's my mom now that worries about me just because um I've only, uh, like uh, I'm, I'm not, you know, most normal guys you know they'll bring a girl home. Um, not to sleep with but for like Thanksgiving, you know? Like, "Hey this is my girlfriend right now." You know, "I'm seeing her for Christmas." You know, "I'm dating this girl." Um I've only ever brought home that girl I dated for a couple of weeks in high school. Um but I think in the back of my mom's mind she worries that she might have another gay son. Um and she'll ask me, "Who are you dating right now? Are you dating anyone?" And I'll tell her, I'm, I'm not very uh open with like those kinds of things with my mom so I'll just be like, "You know I'm kind of dating around." [pause] Um, yeah but I think my mom worries.

T: She never said anything explicitly, just more of the general kinds of questions, like "Hey, are you seeing anyone?"

W: Yeah. *And it is strange* – I'm a 31 year-old man and I've, I don't bring my girlfriends, I mean not that I have any, but I, I don't like bring women to the house or anything like that. And that's not, I don't think that's normal.

In William's account, "normal" guys, by whom he means straight men, demonstrate their sexual identity by bringing home women to meet their family. William identifies as straight based on his attraction to women, yet this identity remains in question because he fails to prove it through a heterosexual relationship. Other men in the study also talked

about how their sexuality came under scrutiny from parents, friends, and acquaintances when they were not actively dating. As I showed in the previous chapter, some participants said parental concerns about their sexuality were assuaged when they were dating someone of the "opposite" sex. While William would like to be in a relationship, the best he can do, in the absence of a romantic partner, is profess that he is "dating around" in order to reassure his mother. This need to reassure her of his straightness takes on additional weight due to her open disapproval of homosexuality, which William witnessed firsthand when his brother came out as gay.

William also talks about his interest in women to signal his straightness to his coworkers. He told me he recently had a conversation with a coworker about a woman he had a crush on, "When I was having that conversation about liking J and wanting to go out with her, I maybe said it kind of loud for everyone to hear. Um, [in mocking tone] "William likes a girl – yay!" Um, but I think that's the extent to me letting people know that I'm not gay. It's not some big macho show. It's just letting them know – I'm interested in women…if you know anyone." William is careful not to present this form of straight identity work as overcompensation – it is not a "big macho show" – as this would be seen as a sign of insecurity about his straightness. Other respondents also mentioned expressing interest in women – either verbally as William did, or nonverbally through, for example, "checking out" women who pass by – as a way they signaled their straightness in social interactions.

William suspects one reason he does not have a girlfriend is because he often ends up consigned to the role of "gay best friend." When I asked him if women he was interested in "mistake" him as gay, he replied:

> It often happens that I become really good friends with a girl and she [pauses] to me I'm really interested in her, I want to develop something, I want to develop a friendship and a relationship at the same time and then uh when I finally you know talk about those feelings it's like, [gets quiet, said with sadness] "No. You know let's not go there." And I think maybe, and I've always suspected it that it has something to do with that. That maybe the fact that I'm approachable to them as a, a "gay best friend" um is what draws them to me initially. But then I end up falling for them but um [with sadness] but then they're not interested because I'm just [trails off] their friend.

When I asked if there were specific moments when he recognizes he is the "gay best friend," he said:

> Um, I don't think, I mean usually, usually by that point they know that I'm straight. Um but I don't know, it just feels like they're comfortable around me because they don't see me as a threat, as a, as a male like, you know like the male gaze. 'Cause for the most part um, like I won't hang out with a girl and be like,

> "hey, [in mocking tone] check out your rack". You know I'll be very respectful, maintain eye contact, treat them well, talk to them [pause] like a human being.

Here, William, like other men in my study, discursively distances himself from "typical" men who he imagines treat women solely as sex objects. He also makes it clear that he is not trying to fool women into thinking he is gay in order to come across as non-threatening. While he thinks they may initially see him as a potential "gay best friend," he says that he makes his straightness clear to them.

In one story, William talked about how he indicated his straightness to a woman he was interested in. William describes an event he attended with three women, one of whom he had a crush on: "We attended a screening of *Spice World* – and I love *Spice World*. And the theater had Spice Girl impersonators – drag queen impersonators – so whenever a big number would come on the screen they would come out and sing along to the song. Not really sing along but kind of lip synch along to the song." When I asked if he was concerned the woman he had a crush on thought he was gay, he replied:

> Um, I don't know. When we were wrapping it up at the end of the night, um, I did mention, I did say something [pause] to let her know that I was straight. I don't know why I felt the need to do that but I did. I don't remember what I said. Like I wasn't complimenting her. It was, I think it was something about my own sexuality, like you know, "I'm a straight guy but you know I'm comfortable you

know coming out here and watching this." Like, "It was a lot of fun. We should do this again sometime."

As I discussed in Chapter Four, William is concerned that he is read as gay due to his "feminine" interests. As I witnessed, William interpreted a woman's surprise that he knew the order of Disney movies as an indication that she thought he was gay. It is interesting to note that, here, William said he does not know why he felt the need to "out" himself as straight.

Pragmatic Reasons for "Coming Out" as Straight

When I asked participants if it was important to be recognized as straight, most responded immediately with a "no." Several explained that there is nothing wrong with being gay, and they did not want to imply a disapproval of gayness through a strong investment in a straight identity. It is worth noting that these men were in relationships with women, and therefore, they did not face being mistaken as gay by women they wanted to date. Other men said that they did not care what people thought about them because they were comfortable and secure in their identity. Yet, several did add a qualification – they do try to signal their straightness to men who hit on them because they do not want to "lead them on" or "waste their time." Other men in my study, even

ones who said being seen as straight was not important, talked about pragmatic reasons for signaling their heterosexuality to women.

One reason men came out as straight was to avoid being cast as the "gay best friend." Nestor, the 21 year-old Latino man that I described in Chapter Five, said that he is sometimes "mistaken" as gay because he is particular about his appearance: "Whenever I do buy clothes I like to put a lot of time and energy into it. And so I like to go shopping if, you know if that's what I'm gonna do, like yeah, because I care, like I wanna be thoughtful about it." He said that his interest in shopping and fashion sometimes led women to assume he was gay:

> And like I definitely, in high school I would go like shopping with girls because um, I was just like, they knew that I would not lie to them. And I think again that is one of the traits, that at least on TV and in movies, it's like [mocking] "Oh, the sassy gay friend that I go shopping with." And so it's like easy to get written into that role. Um because once you see it other places you just assume that that's what that means, right?

Here, Nestor points to the way media portrayals of friendships between straight women and gay men influence how his sexuality is read. Nestor is self-aware that he fits the mold of the "sassy gay friend" based on his interest in shopping, along with his "honest" and open assessment of how clothes fit his female friends.

Because it is easy to "get written into" the role of gay best friend, Nestor said that he does try to indicate his heterosexuality to women that he is interested in. He reported that this is usually done indirectly. For example, he said he brings up "funny anecdotes," like, "that one time my college roommate told everybody I was gay." Here, he refers to an incident during this freshman year of college when he discovered that his roommate had told "everyone" in the dorm that he was gay, which he did not find funny at the time. Although Nestor said this was the first time anyone had thought he was gay, he later said:

> I had girlfriends that would joke about it I guess. Um, yeah my high school girlfriend would be like, I guess like say things – but not like in a mean or teasing way – but just like a sort of catty way…It was more of a joke. And I think that has been the case for a lot of the people I've dated. They'll like you know tease me for like uh [in lower tone, speaking off to the side] criticizing how they dress or like uh you know – oh, what was the one? – they would just call me like a little intellectual, stuff like that. It's not mean spirited, but it's definitely something where if you're making a joke about it, it's gone through your mind.

In this quote, Nestor downplays girlfriends' jokes about his sexuality. While he claimed to not experience these jokes as malicious, he does believe they indicate that women he dated must have at least wondered if he was gay. Given that this has happened with "a lot of the people" he dated, Nestor tries to call attention to the fact that he knows some

people think he is gay, and that he primarily finds this "funny," as a way to signal his straight identity.

Sean employs a similar tactic to the one described by Nestor in order to communicate his heterosexuality to women. Sean said he is direct with gay men, "If I sense that someone is, like if I sense that a guy might be into me – I just don't want to lead anybody on so I just say, 'Hey, I'm straight.'' He used to "cue more subtly" by bringing up women he had dated, but he said these indirect cues were often ignored by men: "People are so sure that I'm gay that that stuff would just bounce right off." With women, he employs a different tactic:

> And then if I'm attracted to someone, like I very much clearly say like, I find a way to say it, more nuanced usually. You know I do a comedy show where I tell stories of people assuming I'm gay so that's an easy thing to like lead in with. Or just, and then they'll be like, "Oh yeah, I thought that you were gay." And I'm like, "Yeah, I know. Okay, let's just, now that you know that I'm not, let's move on." [laughs]

While this sounds like paranoia, Sean's attempts to make it "clear" that he is straight makes sense given the traumatic experience described earlier in this chapter. Like Nestor, Sean claimed to tell humorous stories about being mistaken as gay to signal his straightness while not coming across as overly defensive about it.

The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing

As the stories above demonstrate, several participants said it is important to be recognized as straight by women. Therefore, they attempt to convey their heterosexuality in interactions with women – sometimes by directly stating that they are straight or, more commonly, through sharing stories about being mistaken as gay. In these accounts, signaling straightness is presented as both pragmatic, they want to avoid being placed in the role of "gay best friend," and ethical, they do not want to lead people on. This narrative offers a justification for assertions of heterosexuality that could otherwise be seen as defensive. Unlike the "gay straight guy" referenced in the introduction who deceives women into thinking he is gay, these men feared being viewed as a woman's "new gay friend."

A few men in my study, however, could be described by the "wolf in sheep's clothing" trope. These men admitted, with some guilt, that they had allowed themselves to be read as gay in order to appear non-threatening to women they were sexually interested in. Jon, a 25 year-old white man who grew up in a small town two hours west of Austin, was one of these men. Jon sent the following email in response to my flyer, "I've been mistaken for gay. Both I and my friend thought we should talk." On my way to the interview we had set up in subsequent emails, I received a text from Jon telling me to look for the "tall guy wearing a gray shirt." Jon was easy to spot when he walked

through the door: he was a 6'5" beanpole wearing a gray pullover, loose-fitting Levi's, and white Adidas tennis shoes. His Oakley sunglasses sat perched on top of his closely cropped blond hair for the entirety of the interview. His face was long and thin, with a bulbous nose and piercing blue eyes.

Jon seemed somewhat standoffish at first, but become increasingly animated during the interview. In a deep, booming voice he answered most of my questions in a matter-of-fact manner as he alternated between staring off into the distance and giving me a dead eyed stare. When I asked why he decided to participate in the study, he said he and his "buddy" saw the flyer at a Mexican restaurant and they both thought he should contact me because he "definitely had [been mistaken for gay] a million times, for sure." When I said that I interpreted his email as communicating his friend's interest in doing an interview too, Jon said, "Oh no, he *is* gay. But he wouldn't be mistaken for gay unless he was in a gay club. He's just like a regular dude." By "regular dude," Jon meant that his friend is a conventionally masculine gay man who can pass for straight. When I asked Jon how he would describe his own gender, he replied, "I think I'm a regular ass dude – in general." He said, "in general" because he claimed to have a tendency to be a little bit "hyperemotional," (which his friend, mentioned above, assured him was a sign of intelligence) compared to "a really stable burly dude who dudn't really have a care in the world." Later in the interview when Jon described himself as a "regular dude" again, I asked him to explain what this meant. He responded: "Just [pause] beer, girls, money, weed."

Two minutes into the interview when we were discussing how he found out about the study, Jon declared: "I never feel bad about being mistaken for gay at all, like it dudn't bother me one bit." He continued:

> Honestly, I was saying like when I was younger, I'm almost glad that I got made fun of for possibly being gay or whatever because like the dudes that were in the closet, that would have hurt them more. You know they would have reacted, they would have like really like taken that, like overreacted compared to like how I would take it. I'm just like, "They're just assholes," or whatever. Like it doesn't matter, it dudn't matter, if it's not that I'm gay, it's something else. They're just making fun of me – it dudn't mean anything.

Like other men in my study, Jon asserted that he did not interpret being called a "fag" or "gay" in middle school and high school as having anything to do with his sexuality. His heterosexual sensibility protected him from the sting of the fag epithet and allowed him to shrug off homophobic bullying. Unlike the closeted gay kids at his school, he did not need to overcompensate to prove his heterosexuality in response to being called "gay." Later in the interview, I asked Jon to describe his sexual identity. He replied:

> I'm 100% heterosexual. If I wanted to do something otherwise, I woulda done it and I don't think I'd be insecure about it. 'Cause personally I don't have any

> problem with it at all, like, if I wanted to do it I would just start small and see if I felt like doing it. I would just do it, you know I'm not like insecure or anything like that [pause] and trying something you know, I would've done it. So I'm definitely not interested at all. Otherwise I'm definitely heterosexual, for sure.

Here, Jon declares his absolute certainty of his heterosexuality, while also asserting that this claim has nothing to do with internalized homophobia. As I argued earlier, declarations of straight identity risk being interpreted as a sign of insecurity. Jon contends that he does not have "any problem" with people being gay, but he lacks the desire to try anything sexual with men. When I asked if he ever questioned his sexual identity, he confidently replied, "Nah. No, I've always been *obsessive* with females, for sure." Several men in my study employed a similar rhetoric about being "girl crazy" and having desires for "females" from a young age as a means of authenticating their heterosexuality. Jon's narrative can be read as an example of the sexual identity work men performed during my interviews. Jon presents himself as self-assured about his straightness through claims of being unaffected by homophobic bullying, disavowals of internalized homophobia, and pronouncements about desires for women that are traceable back to early childhood.

As I mentioned earlier, Jon said he had been perceived as gay "like a million times" and said that the topic of my study was relevant in his life. When I asked him for examples, he replied, "I think [pause] I think generally when I get misread it is purely

situational. I'm in a place where like just by default you might be assumed to be gay." Here, Jon is referring specifically to gay bars. The fact that all of his examples revolved around his experiences at gay bars set him apart from the other men I interviewed. Several men did briefly mention being read as gay while patronizing gay bars, but they immediately acknowledged that these examples were too obvious to elaborate on. Given Jon's conventionally masculine attire and comportment, it was unsurprising to learn that most of his "mistaken for gay" incidents are "purely situational." After giving examples of men flirting with him and "dancing up on him" at gay bars, Jon clarified that these encounters did not necessarily mean these men thought he was gay. Indicating his knowledge of gay men's sexual cultures, Jon told me that gay men often fantasize about "hooking up with straight dudes." He said that one gay friend of his regularly meets up with a married man to have sex. In other words, he understands that being in gay spaces leads to being approached by men, regardless of whether these men perceive him as gay or straight.

When asked why he frequents gay bars, Jon gave several reasons: he likes dancing to electronic music and gay bars have better dance music than straight clubs, his friend is a DJ who performs regularly at gay clubs, and gay clubs are "the only thing poppin'" on weeknights. Jon works weekends so he often goes out to clubs on Tuesday and Wednesday nights. He claimed that gay clubs draw large crowds who like to party even on weeknights. Moreover, Jon argued that he feels more "at home" at gay clubs compared to straight clubs that are "full of asshole dudes who don't even say 'hi' to you."

He elaborated, “The gay culture is more like they party. They like to have some drinks and chat and everybody knows each other. Like they have a community. It’s a community where it’s like a family, you know? It’s not like the straight scene.” Jon said that he identified with gay men because he knew what it was like to be an outcast, which for him was related to having “gnarly” acne in high school. He asserted, “I love my gay friends, I really do.” He also spoke passionately about being anti-homophobic when I asked him if ever worried about being a target of homophobia:

> I don’t worry about it but it does very much upset me whenever I see it. And I’ll, if somebody thinks I’m gay, or if somebody makes a homophobic comment, like I have no problem saying like, saying something really explicit about referring to me like doing something gay like to piss them off, like to make them hate me for being gay. Like, “I’m gay motherfucker!” – even though I’m not. I’ll just be like, “Hey dude, you hate gays? Fuck you. I’ll fight you right now. You wanna treat me like I’m gay, ‘cause those are my brothers. I love my gay friends. Like if you hate them, you hate me, and you hate my brothers too.” Like to me, I identify with them so it’s not like I have to be gay to feel very offended by that.

In this quote, Jon contends that he challenges homophobia directly and even takes on a gay identity as a form of confrontation. This portrayal of himself as anti-homophobic

simultaneously shores up his masculinity through the expression of masculine bravado – he is willing to fight to defend his "brothers."

Jon's progressive views about gay people do not extend to his views about women, which is unsurprising given the masculinist language used in his screed against homophobia. His interview is strewn with casual misogyny. For example, he told a story about a "girl" he was dating who accused him of being gay with the friend he mentioned at the beginning of the interview. He dismissed her accusation by labeling her as "crazy" and pointing to her abuse of alcohol and prescription pills: "She was a nice girl and everything, but she was crazy. The hotter they are the crazier they are, right? I mean she was pretty hot." Throughout the interview Jon talked about women as sex objects and as dupes that could be manipulated into sex through the use of sales techniques that he had acquired through his job as a real estate agent. Despite Jon's frequent assertions about being secure as a "100% heterosexual," "regular dude," he admitted to having "insecurity issues" in high school and college because he had severe acne and was unsuccessful with women. He said: "That fucked me up really bad in the head, I think, for a while, because I wasn't getting girls and shit like that. That fucks a dude up, you know?...It just sucked, dude! I didn't like, I just didn't get laid enough. It fucking sucks." When I asked if he tried to date, he said, "I just wasn't very assertive about it, you know. Not really. Every now and then I'd get attention and I'd take an opportunity and do it, but it would just be so few and far between." For Jon, not "getting girls" and failing to "get laid" are signs of a failed masculinity.

Paradoxically, the pursuit of "getting girls" figured into Jon's explanation of why he primarily patronizes gay clubs. He claimed that he "actually has a better chance" with women in gay clubs compared to straight clubs where he has to compete with "a million other dudes" for women's attention: "Honestly, I do better in gay clubs, like with the straight girlfriends who come. Trust me there's plenty of 'em." I asked, "You do better dancing with women?" He said, "Yeah, I can just go dance with her and she hasn't already been creeped on by a bunch of creepy dudes that are just skeezin' around in the corners of the clubs. Like I'm there to dance and have fun. Second of all I would definitely like to meet people, and girls in particular, but I'm there to dance." Jon likely has multiple motivations for spending his nights out at gay clubs, including the reasons listed earlier in this section. Yet, it is worth noting that the pursuit of heterosexual conquest, and his claims to be successful at this, is a large part of his narrative about going to gay clubs.

This is the context in which Jon admits to letting himself be read as gay in order to make moves on women. Towards the end of our interview, he divulged, "I've almost like played the game where like I make the chick think I'm like gay to get in and then like flip the script. I've probably pulled that shit a couple times." The word "almost" serves the rhetorical purpose of tempering the degree of deception Jon claims to engage in. To clarify, I started to say, "Like you consciously..." and Jon interrupted with, "I consciously make 'em think, but they like they know it's bullshit, they'll figure it out in two seconds. Like it's almost like if you make people think it, they'll think the opposite.

You know if you try to sell somebody on something they'll almost like disagree with you." The conversation continued:

> T: So with women sometimes you'll play it just to get an in with them?
>
> J: That was then, yes. Yeah.
>
> T: But you don't do that as much anymore?
>
> J: No, absolutely not. I don't try to misrepresent myself, at all. But it wasn't really like I was like, like I was saying that. It was more like I kind of let them think that. I just let them think that. And same thing with guys, maybe I'll let them think that. Like I'll know that they think I am and I can kind of see it in their head, they're like thinking like, [in lecherous tone] "Okay, am I gonna get further? I think it's a go! I think this is going well!" They have that puppy dog look. [laughs]
>
> T: And why would you do that?
>
> J: Just for attention I guess. I don't know. I'm an asshole – when I was younger. I don't do that anymore.

In this exchange, Jon said he also "mislead" men into thinking he was gay because he liked the attention. He also, perhaps imagining my disapproval even as I maintained a neutral countenance and tone, said that he no longer engaged in this kind of deception. Only one other man in my study openly acknowledged taking advantage of being

perceived as gay in order to appear non-threatening to women he was sexually interested in. This does not mean that other men did not engage in the kind of deception described in the introduction of this chapter and in Jon's story. Admitting to this means acknowledging an engagement in behavior that most men in my study described as unethical. I tell Jon's story to illustrate that at least some men do fit the "wolf-in-sheep's clothing" trope that involves consciously taking advantage of perceptions that they are gay men in order to gain intimate access to women.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I focused on men's experiences with being "mistaken as gay" by women. I found that men were more eager to give examples of gay men hitting on them as "mistaken for gay" incidents than they were to talk about being perceived as gay by women. While being hit on by gay men was described as largely amusing, men expressed frustration and sadness regarding women's misrecognition of their straight identity.

These stories highlight some of the ways that men's straight identities are constructed in interactions with women. It is important to recognize that these are stories about how these men imagine women perceive them. In these men's interpretations, their sexuality is invalidated by women who view them through the trope of the "gay best friend." Sean claimed that women explicitly placed him in this role, but Nestor and

William only assume this is what happens to them. Regardless of what the women in their lives actually believe, fear of being desexualized through the "gay best friend" trope causes them to signal their straightness in their interactions with women. This signaling, which could be seen as heterosexual defensiveness, is cast as a pragmatic and ethical decision. I also found that some of the men I interviewed engage with women as a "wolf in sheep's clothing," allowing themselves to be read as gay in order to appear non-threatening to women they are romantically or sexually interested in. The wolf in sheep's clothing trope is also centered around the "gay best friend" – at least some men do take advantage of straight women's desires for non-sexual intimate relationships with gay men.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

> Gender is about race is about class is about sexuality is about age is about nationality is about an entire range of social relations…In a society where these terms matter, people cannot check identities at the door. In a society where standing on the "wrong" side of one of these terms can get your head bashed in, people ignore identities at their peril.
>
> - Kath Weston (1996:125)

> Some people have asked me what is the use of increasing possibilities for gender. I tend to answer: Possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread.
>
> - Judith Butler (2004:29)

At the beginning of Chapter Four, I introduced Sean, the 27 year-old self-described "social justice comedian" who speaks and writes publicly about gender and sexuality, including his experiences as a straight-identified man who is "mistaken for gay." Sean demonstrated a heightened level of reflexivity and sophistication about gender and sexuality compared to most men in this study. Yet, in his thoughtful responses to my questions, he articulated themes that emerged in the other life history interviews I conducted with straight-identified men who claim to be perceived as gay.

Here, I include an extended excerpt from my interview with Sean that highlights the themes I presented in Chapters Four through Six.

> T: Do you think that your gender or gender presentation has changed over time?
>
> S: [Said matter of fact] Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. Um so when I was a kid I, I used to, when I was little – before I kind of understood the repercussions of gender and gender expression – I used to love wearing my sisters' clothes. I have two older sisters. And I just looked up to them, they were like the coolest people in my life, right? So I would wear their like, I loved to wear their shirts, I tried to get them to paint my nails, or I'd get them to braid my hair or whatever and it was super fun. And they wouldn't do it because they knew that was wrong. But sometimes my mom would make them do it, because I was like six, you know?
>
> T: Oh, your mom actually made them?
>
> S: Uh-huh – my mom didn't care. I think that that in a lot ways, like if it wasn't for my mom's affirmation of just kind of like individuality in these ways, I don't think I would have ever become comfortable [sounds unsure of how to say this] with the way that I am. I, after several like um, getting beaten up by several people at my school like over and over and over again, I started to realize like it was, it was, as sad as this is, *I literally got like my femininity beaten out of me*. It was like every time it happened I was like, "Okay, I need to change one thing, change one thing" and then eventually I was just like your uh kind of like

posturing, hyper-masculine boy. And there was this time [laughs] when I looked back at these pictures and I was so ashamed of like / it was like, "What was I wearing in these pictures!?" And I was wearing like a white, ripped tank-top and like [said with disgust] baggy jeans and I looked back and I just cracked up. Like that was *me*?! I was like *that was never me*! Like *that was never me*! But that's what I wore.

T: And this was to avoid bullying and all of that?

S: Mm-hmm, yeah it was to like, yeah and back then the irony of it is is that back then like you know I was attracted to girls and I wanted like a girl to be girlfriend or whatever and they weren't gonna be my girlfriend, the other way – that's how I saw it, right? Because I was being told, even at ten or eleven or twelve that you had to be like a [deep voice] real man or whatever the language was – I don't think they used that language back then. That's pretty common now but um yeah so in a lot of ways – I'm not trying to get laid at 12 [laughs], but you know what I mean?

T: You were trying to attract girls?

S: Mm-hmm.

T: And you thought that you had to be more masculine?

S: Absolutely. Yes, so it was more utilitarian *then*, whereas now it's like the exact opposite. But yeah and then so that was, and then in high school I kind of toned down but I would still say I was very masculine in presentation, not hyper-

masculine like I was for a little while when I was bouncing back. And then in college it kind of like, you can see in photos, like Facebook happened right before I got to college, so it's cool because in my Facebook album you can kind of see like me flirting with just kind of different gender expression over the four years I was at Purdue.

T: And what about when you moved to Austin?

S: Just freaking out, yeah. I just – I never, since I've lived here I've never once, I genuinely can't think of a time where I've left my apartment and been concerned about what I was wearing. Whereas I'm on the road about half the time, and sometimes I'll pack, so when I'm performing my comedy show I wear kind of specific, it's kind of like a…a… a costume. I wear specific clothes because I know that they work for the show that I'm doing. Um, but when I'm in the town, like I was in South Carolina a few weeks ago, you know, I'm just wearing clothes, like I go to get coffee or whatever, but I dress, I have clothes that I specifically wear to other places because I am afraid to wear clothes that I would feel comfortable wearing in Austin, because I've had some really dangerous situations as a result of being, like I was up in Amarillo, I was in Tennessee, I was in Wyoming, and a few different places where I was just dressed in my normal Austin way and I had people follow me back to my hotel room, or people threaten me, and it's um, so now I've gotten a little bit smarter about that.

As I showed in Chapter Four, several of the men in my study described themselves as feminine on account of their practices, traits, and interests. Despite self-identifying as straight, they are sometimes assumed to be gay due to their effeminacy. As illustrated in Chapter Five, the participants in my study reported being targets of homophobia on account of being read as gay, which was usually related to gender nonconformity. While Sean claimed that he eventually embraced his femininity, in the past he tried to appear more masculine in response to the violent policing of his gender. As feminist scholars have pointed out, violence and the threat of violence are central to the maintenance of the sexual and gender order (Butler 2004). Even in the present, Sean, like other men in my study, monitors his gender presentation in particular spaces based on the fear of violence. I argue that these accounts illustrate the continuing significance of homophobia as a means of policing gender and sexuality. As I discussed in Chapter Six, the men in my study expressed concern about demonstrating their heterosexuality to women they were romantically interested in. While Sean used a masculine appearance in the past to attract girls, he now signals his heterosexuality by making jokes about being mistaken for gay. These stories point to the roles women play in the construction and validation of men's straight identities.

These stories should not be read as extraordinary. The men I interviewed are not freaks, pariahs, or complete anomalies, in fact, most of them were rather unremarkable. While a few of the men in my study had eye-catching aesthetic styles – like Jared, the Edwardian dandy, and Julien, the 1960's garage-rocker – most of these men would fail to

draw a second-glance on the street. They are the barista serving you at the coffee shop, the man waiting in line in front of you at the grocery store, the neighbor you pass by on the sidewalk while walking your dog, or the coworker in the cubicle next to yours at the office.

These men, however, likely had a heightened reflexivity about the construction of their gender and sexual identities because they bump up against the everyday, commonsense understandings of these categories. As a result, they are sometimes called to account for their gender presentation and to assert their heterosexuality more consciously than men who are mostly perceived as straight, or at least unaware they are read as gay, in social interactions. For this reason, these men's narratives underline the work that goes into producing and presenting straightness. The doxa about gender and sexuality holds that these categories are coherent, natural, fixed, stable, and self-evident. The stories told in this study challenge this common-sense view by highlighting the ways that gender and sexual identity categories are co-constructed and performed in interaction, and the ways that these identities rely on recognition and validation by audiences.

Contextualizing the Sexual Stories

In this dissertation, I argued that the experiences of the men in my study offer a heuristic for understanding shifts and continuities in the construction of men's straight

identities in the context of increasing gay visibility. These men's sexual identity work, and its relationship to gender, must be situated within the current "sexual regime" in the United States. As discussed in the Chapter Two, Seidman (1997:86) defines a "sexual regime as "a field of sexual meanings, discourses, and practices that are interlaced with social institutions and movements." The men in my study reproduce, and occasionally challenge, hegemonic discourses about sexuality, and its relationship to gender, through their "sexual stories" (Plummer 1995)

There are several cultural discourses about sexuality that men drew on in their narratives. First, the heterosexual/homosexual binary is the dominant framework for organizing sexual identity categories in the United States. In other words, people are understood to be *either* heterosexual *or* homosexual. As I argued in the Introduction, the question, posed by Josie Cotton, "Johnny, Are You Queer?," only makes sense within this sexual binary. That Johnny might be bisexual is not considered a possibility. Likewise, with the men in my study, bisexuality rarely came up. These men claimed to be straight, and by this they meant that they exclusively desired, and only engaged in sexual practices with, women. Only once did a man in my study talk about being suspected of being "bisexual." Second, sexuality is widely believed to be biologically determined. This is evident in the argument that gay people are "born that way," which is a discourse that is utilized by gay rights activists to counter arguments by the religious right that being gay is a "choice." The men in my study viewed their heterosexuality as innate and most traced their desires for the other sex back to childhood or early puberty.

Third, in contrast to cultural discourses about women's sexual fluidity, men's sexuality is largely understood as static. Discourses about women's sexual fluidity sometimes allow women to engage in sexual acts with other women without being marked as lesbians. Men, however, are subject to a "one time rule" in regards to engaging in sexual acts with other men. This means that even one sexual act with another man marks men as gay. Given this, it is unsurprising that men in my study described their sexual orientation and practices as being exclusively heterosexual.

Straight Identities in the Context of Increasing Visibility of Gay and Lesbians

One effect of the increasing visibility of gays and lesbians is that heterosexuality has lost its unquestioned, silent status (Seidman 2003; Dean 2014). The experiences of the men in my study demonstrate this shift. Sometimes, the men in my study were explicitly asked if they were gay. Even when not directly questioned about their sexuality, they gave examples of interactions that they interpreted as evidence of being read as gay. In response to this, some of the men in my study discussed their conscious attempts to communicate their straight identity in interaction. This included directly stating that they are straight, but more commonly involved indirect ways of signaling their straight identity, such as casually mentioning wives or girlfriends, "checking out" women, wearing wedding rings, engaging in displays of affection with their partner, or even joking about being read as gay. As I discussed, these men walked the fine line of

wanting to signal their "straightness" while not appearing anxious or defensive, which would have undermined their claim to a straight identity.

This research also points to a shifting relationship between homophobic attitudes and the construction of men's straight identities. Nearly all of the men in my study explicitly said there is nothing wrong with being gay. Several of my participants talked about having gay friends, going to gay clubs, and supporting gay rights. They were amused and flattered when gay men flirted with them – some even talked about flirting back. Others were anti-homophobic and said they openly challenged homophobia. Yet, it is important not to conflate anti-homophobia with anti-sexism. Some of the men in my study talked easily and openly about their acceptance of gay people and support for gay rights alongside disparaging and objectifying talk about women, as I illustrated with Jon's interview in the previous chapter. One man even jokingly stated, "Sometimes I wish I was gay so that I didn't have to deal with women." Furthermore, these men's presentation of themselves as non-homophobic should also be understood as an aspect of their performance of a straight identity. Because homophobia is widely believed to be a sign of repressed same-sex desire, the men in my study worked to distance themselves from appearing homophobic. While the men in my study claimed to not be homophobic, this does not mean that homophobia no longer plays a role in the construction of straight identities. As my interviews demonstrate, their own heterosexual identities were formed in the context of parental anxieties that they might turn out to be gay. Furthermore,

several of the men said they still contend with both explicit homophobia and homophobic microaggressions on account of being read as gay.

To be sure, the straight men in my study have benefited from the increasing visibility and acceptance of gays and lesbians. This is evident when men talked about their enjoyment of being read as gay. Similar to Bridges' (2014) findings, the men in my study discursively tried to distance themselves from aspects of conventional masculinity that have become increasingly stigmatized. Several of the men said they were not like "typical guys," who they portrayed as emotionally stunted, unstylish, and retrograde in their attitudes towards gays and women. These men present themselves as more enlightened, evolved, and progressive than the conventionally masculine man. For some of the men in my study, being read as gay confirmed that they were not like the "typical guy." The increasing acceptance of gay men has carved out room for straight men to engage in a wider range of gendered practices, particularly for those with the class privilege that allows them to relocate to expensive cities like Austin.

Yet, the men in my study have to confront the continuing conflation of gender and sexuality. Because many of the men describe themselves, and claim to be viewed by others, as "feminine," they are often assumed to be in the closet when they make claims to a straight identity. Despite progressive intentions, popular discourse about "closet cases" or "latent homosexuals" can work to reproduce heteronormativity. As I noted in the Introduction, using Marcus Bachmann's voice and bodily movements as signs of his gayness relies on a notion of gender essentialism that strengthens the normative link

between heterosexuality and conformity to gender norms. As critical scholars have pointed out, heteronormativity is as much about upholding and reproducing binary gender norms as it is about policing sexuality (Ingraham 2005, Jackson and Scott 2010). This research highlights the persistence of gender policing even in the context, and sometimes purportedly in the service, of increased LGBTQ visibility.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

As with all research, there are limitations to this study that should be addressed in future research. One limitation is that my analysis is based solely on interview data. While interviews are an excellent way to examine how people make sense of their experiences, they often do not tell us what people actually do in social interactions. In other words, there are reasons to believe that attitudes expressed in interviews do not always correspond to behavior (Jerolmack and Khan2014). While it would be difficult to study "mistaken for gay" incidents through ethnographic observation, it would not be impossible. For example, I witnessed one encounter that a respondent interpreted as an example of being read as gay during an interview. Several of the men in my study talked about being "mistaken for gay" at the coffee shops where they work as baristas. One possible way to conduct an observational study would be to spend time at these coffee shops, observing these men interacting with customers.

These men's interpretations of being mistaken as gay represent only one piece of this phenomenon. While I hoped to interview most of the partners of the men in my study, I was only able to complete four interviews. These interviews were interesting and they informed my analysis, but I was not able to clearly see patterns based on the small number of interviews completed, so I decided to not include them in the dissertation. One limitation to conducting a larger number of interviews with partners is that half of the men in my study were single, which, as I discussed in Chapter Six, was not irrelevant to my findings. Another limitation of the sample is the lack of class and racial diversity, as it ended up including primarily white middle class men. Yet, as I show in my analysis, class positions and racial identities impact men's experiences of being read as gay. Future research into this phenomenon should explore the experiences of men of color. Further research should also include interviews with heterosexual women who are mistaken for being gay in order to compare and contrast women's experiences with being perceived as gay with men's experiences. Finally, all of my interviews for the dissertation were conducted in Austin, Texas. Conducting interviews outside of Austin will allow for an understanding of how geographical location impacts the construction of heterosexual identities.

Despite the limitations, this research makes several contributions to the sociology of gender and sociology of sexuality. First, it contributes to gender theory by examining straight men's engagement in practices coded as "feminine." Up until now, most theorizing about male femininity has focused on gay men. Second, it illustrates how

homophobia impacts people who self-identify as straight and provides a nuanced understanding of how heterosexual privilege operates in social interactions. Finally, while much of the research on masculinities focuses on interactions between men, my research highlights the roles that women play in constructing heterosexual masculinities.

Appendix I: Interview Guide for Straight-Identified Men who are Read as Gay

Intro questions

1. How did you find out about the study?
2. Why did you want to participate?

Biographical questions

1. Where were you born?
2. Where did you grow up?
3. What was it like growing up in _____?
4. Where else have you lived/spent significant time? How would you describe your time in those places?

Sexual and Gender Identity (Self-perception)

1. How would you describe your sexual identity?
2. Why do you identify as _____? Or, what does it mean to you when you say you are _____?
3. Do you feel like this identity was a choice?
4. Has your sexual identity changed over time?
5. Were there periods when you questioned your sexual identity? If so, when? What made you question your sexuality?
6. How would you describe your gender and gender presentation?
7. Has your gender presentation changed over time?

Being "misread" as gay or lesbian (how you think others perceive you)

1. How do you know that people think that you are gay? Can you give me specific examples of times when you felt you were being misread?
2. How often is your sexuality misread? Is it something you deal with on a daily basis or does it rarely occur?
3. When and where do people misread your identity? Are there certain places where this is more of an issue?
4. Have you always had issues with being misread as gay? Or are there particular moments in your life when this was more of an issue?
5. Have you ever experienced homophobia as a result of being misread? If so, what happened and how did you react?
6. Growing up, were your parents concerned about your sexual orientation? If so, how did you know? Did they ever say anything to you about this issue?

7. Do you tend to be misread by men, women, or both? Does being misread impact your relationships with men and women? If so, how?
8. Have questions about your sexual orientation been an issue with romantic partners? Do interpretations of your sexuality change depending on your relationship status?
9. Are you misread by both straight and gay people? Are there differences in how straight and gay people read and react to your sexual identity?
10. Do you have gay and lesbian friends? If so, what do they think about your sexual identity?
11. Why do you think that your sexuality is misread?
12. How do you react to being misread as gay? Do your reactions vary? Have these reactions changed over time?
13. Do you try to demonstrate or signal your heterosexuality? If so, how do you do this?
14. When you tell people you are straight, do you think they believe you?
15. Is being recognized as straight important to you? Why or why not?
16. Are there any questions that I didn't ask you that you think I should ask in future interviews?

Appendix II: Interview Guide for Female Partner

Biographical questions

5. Where were you born?
6. Where did you grow up?
7. What was it like growing up in _____?
8. Where else have you lived/spent significant time? How would you describe your time in those places?

Questions about sexual and gender identity of interviewee

8. How would you describe your sexual identity?
9. What do you identify as _____?
10. Has your sexual identity changed over time?
11. Were there periods when you questioned your sexual identity? If so, when? What made you question your sexuality?
12. Do people ever miread your sexual identity? (For example, do people ever think you are gay?)
13. How would you describe your gender and gender presentation?
14. Has your gender presentation changed over time?

Questions about partner being read as gay

17. How did you meet your partner?
18. What did/do you find attractive about your partner?
19. How would you describe your partner's gender and gender presentation?
20. How do you know that people think your partner is gay? Can you give me specific examples of times when you felt like your partner was being misread?
21. How often is your partner's sexuality misread? Is it something you or they deal with on a daily basis or does it rarely occur?
22. When and where do people misread your partner's identity? Are there certain places where this is more of an issue?
23. Did/do you ever have doubts that your partner was/is straight? Why or why not?
24. Why do you think that your partner's sexuality is misread?
25. How do you react when people think your partner as gay? Do your reactions vary? Have these reactions changed over time?
26. Have you or your partner ever experienced homophobia as a result of his being mistaken for gay? If so, what happened and how did you react?

27. Do you try to demonstrate or signal your partner's heterosexuality? If so, how do you do this?
28. Is it important to you that your partner is recognized as straight? Why or why not?
29. Are there any questions that I didn't ask you that you think I should ask in future interviews?

Appendix III: Recruitment Flyer

Are you ever mistaken for being gay?

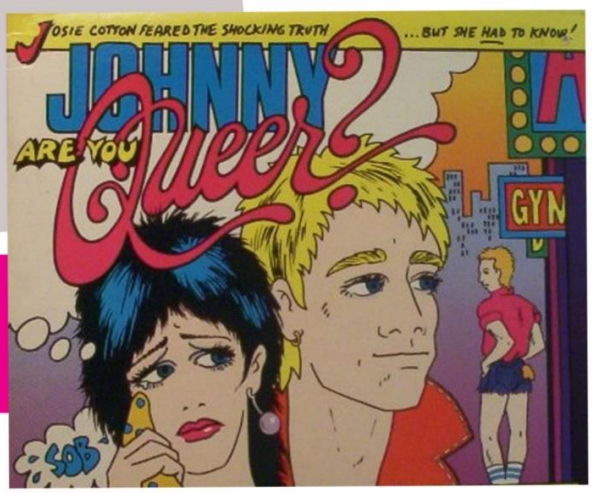
ARE YOU OVER THE AGE OF 18?
WOULD YOU LIKE TO SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCE?

If you answered yes to these questions, I would like to interview you. Why? I am conducting research about the life experiences of men who are misread as gay.
This research project examines how straight men manage their sexual identity in a world of increasing gay and lesbian visibility.

Who am I? I am a graduate student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Texas.

What do you get? The opportunity to share your story with an interested listener.

If you are interested in participating, or know someone who would be, please contact me:
t.beaver@utexas.edu
512-593-1965



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Appendix IV: List of Respondents

Name	Age	Sex	Race/Ethnicity	Education	Annual Income	Occupation	Relationship Status
Billy	29	M	White	BA	$44,000	Instructional Technology Specialist	Married
Zane	28	M	White	HS	$21,000	Teacher	Married
Martin	33	M	White	MA	$17,000	Graduate Student	Married
Clint	50	M	White	MBA	$400,000	Consultant	Married
Dylan	35	M	White	MD	$150,000	Physician	Married
Parker	47	M	White	Some College	0	Homemaker	Married
Alex	34	M	White	Some College	$30,000	Handyman/Musician	Married
Jaime	36	M	Latino	Some College	$35,000	Loan Officer	Married
Logan	30	M	White	Associate's	$25,000	Barista	Partnered
Julien	33	M	White	Some College	$30,000	Musician/record dealer	Partnered
Jared	30	M	White	Associate's	$45,000	Process Engineer	Single
Sebastian	24	M	White	BA	$13,000	Barista	Single
Darren	28	M	White	BA	$20,000	Self-employed	Single
Derrick	23	M	White	BA	$24,000	Barista	Single
Nate	39	M	White	BA	$26,000	Field Survey Technician	Single
William	31	M	Latino	BA	$31,000	Loan Collector	Single
Jon	25	M	White	BA	$32,000	Real Estate Agent	Single
Sean	27	M	White	MA	$30,000	Comedian	Single
Nestor	21	M	Latino	Some College	$10,000	Barista	Single
Jack	33	M	White	Some College	$20,000	Camera Operator	Single
Kerry	28	F	White	MA	$24,000	Graduate Student	Partnered
Courtney	38	F	White	BA	$38,000	Photobiologist	Single
Suzie	32	F	White	BA	$24,000	Prevention Specialist	Single
Megan*	29	F	White	BA	$43,000	Administrative Assistant	Married
Aurora*	30	F	White	MA	$48,000	Web Designer	Married
Amanda*	37	F	White	PhD	$53,000	Professor	Married
Kate*	32	F	White	PhD	$61,000	Professor	Married

*partner of a man in the study

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